

# 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 40:1-5 • Katie Fowler • May 5, 2019

Have you ever gotten stuck? Years ago I was driving to the gym late one evening. It was mid-October, that time of year in Colorado when the first snowfall can come any day, any moment. Now, a little bit of backstory: I am from Florida. We are known for a lot of things down there in Florida—beaches, Disney World, strange human interest stories, the world-class Florida Gators (I had to get that in there one more time), but you know what we are NOT known for? Our winter weather driving conditions. I spent my early years driving while wearing flip flops in 80-degree temps on very, very flat roads. When I moved to Colorado, that was a huge adjustment for me. You know when it's barely snowing and you drive by someone, you pass someone who is going negative 5 miles per hour—that's me! Next time you are in the Denver area and see a really, really slow Honda Civic driving through the snow flurries, be sure to wave! So I was driving to the gym and it starts to snow. The road's already become slick. I go to turn, and I lost control of my car, skidded through the other lane—mercifully there were no cars coming. My car jumped the curb, up on a median and landed there in front of a small tree. I take a few seconds to collect myself. And put my car in drive, put my foot on the gas...nothing. Put my car in reverse...nothing. My car wouldn't move. I was stuck.

Do you ever feel stuck? The circumstances in your life seemed to have stalled out. Your tires are spinning but you can't get any traction. Your last unemployment check just came through, and for the thousandth time you have wondered, 'God, what are You doing?' You keep sending out resumes, you compulsively check your emails to see if anyone has responded...nothing. You're stuck. You have been living with mental illness since you were a teenager. But lately things have gotten really hard. Your depression and anxiety feels like you are sliding deeper into the pit. Maybe you just went to your fifth wedding this year and it's not even June, and you are watching your friends get married. You are so happy for them but you wonder, "God, will this ever happen for me?" Maybe the season of grief that you are walking through has just seemed never-ending. They say it's darkest before dawn but you are beginning to question if morning will ever come. Will the veil ever lift? You're stuck. You have been living with a chronic disease for a while now. The doctors don't have a lot of answers, and you are left in a lot of pain. What's worse is that your disease has started to make you feel isolated. Your friends can't understand what you are walking through. One month of sickness, okay. Three months, fine. But five years? Maybe life has just felt for you like a series of disappointments—some relational, some professional, some spiritual—all hard. And for all your trying, you can't seem to get your feet under you. Maybe your bad habits, your addictive patterns, are eating you alive. Or you are stuck in anger, or in unforgiveness. And you just can't see a way forward. Maybe you are stuck in a relationship, with your parents, or with your spouse. Maybe lately, time with God has felt like pulling teeth. 'Why God, why do You seem so distant, so, so quiet? Why isn't anything better?'

Whatever your situation, whatever stuck looks like for you, you find yourself saying: God, I need You to do something, I need You to do a new thing. I need You to break through—in my life, in these circumstances. Because I'm stuck. There are times in our lives where we simply feel like we are sinking down into a slimy pit. Deep in mud. Stuck. What do we do? Where is God? How do we hold on in those places? And really, even more than that, how does God hold on to us? Stick with us in this *Unstuck* series. In this series, we will look at what God is doing in those stuck places of life, how God meets us and carries us through the hard places. Today, we look at what it means to wait on God when we are sinking deep. To wait on God. Because stuck is part of the story, but it's not the end of the story.

In our passage today, David is telling a story of his past. There was this one time when I waited patiently for the Lord. We don't like to wait, do we? Just tell a crowd at the airport gate, as they compulsively watch the flight info board, that their flight has been delayed...again. See how that goes over. And to wait patiently? That basically feels like an oxymoron. Wait patiently? No, I can wait begrudgingly. I can wait bitterly. But patiently? No, thank you. We are teaching our son, Luke, what it means to wait. He is 2 years old. How do you think that's going? Let me tell you. Not well. Try telling a 2-year-old, "Just be patient." Here is what I have noticed about 2-year-olds: When they are told to wait for something, they behave externally the way the rest of us feel internally. Luke falls dramatically to the floor and lays there. Sometimes there is yelling, sometimes there is hitting. Almost always there are tears. I think that's how we feel—maybe we don't flail our arms around, although maybe we do, but internally we are kicking and screaming at God. And let's be honest, for me at least, there are tears.

But the psalmist says, I wait patiently for the Lord. The Bible talks a lot about what it means to wait. It's never a passive thing. But it is hard to wait for God to move when it feels like your life is sinking down into a muddy pit. Two simple reflections for us about what it means to wait for God to move. First: Cling to goodness. Author and therapist Dan Allender said this in an interview: "Hang out with people who are confident of the wild goodness of Jesus and who aren't apt to offer quick or silly and superficial solutions to life's struggles." The second half of the quote is worth its weight in gold. And we pray this sermon series is the exact opposite of offering quick or silly or superficial solutions to life's struggles. But I want us to focus on the first part: Confident of the wild goodness of Jesus. I have been stunned by the phrase ever since I first read it: Confidence in the wild goodness of Jesus.

What does that mean? It's saying this: My circumstances aren't good, but God is good. Now listen, I know that sounds dangerously close to a cliché. But I mean something wilder, something far more beautiful, than anything that could ever fit on a bumper sticker. The goodness of God can't be reduced to some tweetable phrase. It's embodied in the person of Jesus. You want to know what God is like? Look to Jesus

Christ. And there we see the goodness of God.

When we talk about the goodness of Jesus, I am not talking about some sort of throw-away line we say to deny the pain, to try and cover up the pain, to minimize the mess. I am talking about the wild goodness of Jesus that disrupts death, the wild goodness that tenderly speaks to us in our deepest places of shame, that moves us from isolation to the joy of being known again, the goodness of Jesus that welcomes us, just welcomes us. Maybe you look exactly like a 2-year-old, kicking and screaming, snot running down our face, tears falling down—and Jesus just welcomes us into His presence. Not a word of condemnation, just welcome. That's the wild goodness of Jesus that speaks forgiveness and reminds us, "This situation won't get the last word in your life." The wild goodness of Jesus that just keeps bringing beauty from ashes.

[Psalm 27 says:] "I remain confident of this: I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord." Somehow, I will see the wild goodness of Jesus. I think sometimes clinging to goodness looks like a full-body workout. We are sweating and our muscles ache and maybe we are completely out of breath. It's all we can do to keep holding on. Which means waiting on God is less like sitting in the DMV mindlessly waiting for your number to be called and more like a wrestling match. Actively engaging God through wordless prayers, tears, laments, speaking your anger, calling to mind again and again the truth of Scripture. This is who You are Jesus, this is what You have done for me. Which is also why waiting alone is never a good idea. It's like swimming alone is bad. Waiting on God by yourself is no good.

When my car got stuck in the median, you know how I got out? About 10 seconds after hitting the median, there were all of these people around me. Guys pulling their truck over, another grabbing rope from his car. A woman who offered to stand with me in the dark so I wouldn't be alone with all of these strangers. It was that moment, that night, that I learned something really important. You know what I learned? People from Colorado are awesome. They were so quick to help me get unstuck. We will talk more about this in future weeks—what it means to lean into community when we find ourselves stuck. But let me say this: Some days I won't be so sure of the goodness of Jesus. I might forget, I might be facing hardship so bitter. The season of being in the pit may be so long. And I need you to slide up next to me, to cry with me, to hold my hand, and wait with me. And to whisper, "You know Katie, Jesus is good. Wildly good. His love won't quit on you. His faithfulness won't run out on you. He's that good." I will need you to sit with me, embodying the goodness of Jesus.

Because Jesus doesn't stand by the side of the pit, He climbs down in there with us. He has done it before, He will do it again. In the book of Exodus, when the people of God were slaves in Egypt, we read these words: The Lord said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people

in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering" (Exodus 3:7). The Lord says I have seen, I have heard, I am concerned. The Lord says I see you, I hear you, I am concerned for you. And you know what verse 8 says? "So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land." The Lord says, so I have come down to rescue them.

The wild goodness of Jesus looks like Him going all the way down to rescue us, all the way down to the cross, all the way down taking our sin, our shame, our guilt upon himself. All the way down buried in the grave. And the wild goodness of Jesus looks like the Risen One walking out of the tomb. The wild goodness of Jesus disrupts death. Maybe you are here and exploring. You are not a Christian, and you don't believe in the resurrection power of Jesus. You don't believe Jesus walked out of the tomb. I would say start here, start with this idea: There is a love that is stronger than death. There is a love that disrupts the power of death. That's the wild goodness of Jesus. Cling to goodness.

Secondly, dare to hope. Waiting is not a passive activity but an active hope. This is not the end of your story. This is not the totality of your story. In the first part of Psalm 40, David reflects on how the Lord has worked in his life, how the Lord has pulled him out of the slimy pit, saying in verse 3, "He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God." A new song. Not the old song of despair. A song declaring what God has done. We dare to hope in what the Lord will yet do. Which means we bring before the Lord our longings—the ache we feel and the hope we hold. If there is anything I have learned from my counselor over the years, and I have learned a lot—one of the best things I have ever done is to start seeing my counselor; I recommend it for everyone—but what I have learned from her is this two-fold movement, staying awake to our ache, our grief and staying awake to our hope. Don't deny the grief, the disappointment, the pain and at the same time, holding onto to what is true about Jesus. And this is so hard because our go-to move is often to numb the longing, the grief, the sadness. For some it's alcohol, for others it's Netflix or food—but we shut out and shut down the longing we feel, the ache for something new.

But to dare to hope is saying I won't ignore the grief I feel, the frustration, the anguish. And I won't shut down the hope. I will hold both together. God can handle both. That's why I love the psalms. Do you ever wonder, "Am I allowed to say that to God?" Read the psalms. Read the psalms and see how God invites the full expression of our experience, of our feelings, of our desires. See the language the psalmist uses: crying out, expressing joy, songs of lament and songs of hope, honest prayers, expressions of frustration and anger and trust. And love. And praise. All of it, all of it brought before the Lord.

I was reading a blog the other day that talked about what it means

to live in between Good Friday and Easter...between death and resurrection, what we call Holy Saturday. What does it mean to live in this place of waiting? The author (Pete Greig) of the blog, a pastor in the United Kingdom, said this about our reluctance to wait on God: "We race disconcerted to make meaning and find beauty where there simply is none. Yet." To dare to hope is to hold on to that word "yet." No, we don't need to try and manufacture meaning or pretend that everything is okay when it is clearly not. But we hold out hope for what God will yet do. We hold out hope that something can change, that something new can spring up from the ground.

A wise friend reminded me recently that to make any change, you have to do something differently. Do something different: Attend an AA meeting this week. Call our Counseling Coalition Referral Line (844-657-1684)—get help finding a counselor. Share with a friend, "I'm stuck." Someone who is safe and trustworthy. Tell them, "I feel stuck." Share your story. Put pen to paper and tell God how you feel. We take a step, holding out hope that something can change. That something new can spring up from the ground. In the book of Lamentations—and the title of the book clues us in to the mood there—Yet I still dare to hope when I remember this: The faithful love of the Lord never ends! His mercies never cease. Great is his faithfulness; his mercies begin afresh each morning. I say to myself, "The Lord is my inheritance; therefore, I will hope in him!" (Lamentations 3:21-24, New Living Translation). I am putting my trust in You God. Because You are the God who raises the dead. I don't know what you will do here in these circumstances. But I am daring to hope in you again. I am putting my trust in you God because you are the one who calls into being things that are not. You did it in the beginning, out of primeval chaos You brought order, beauty and abundance. In the end, You will make all things right again. When Christ returns, You will make all things new. I don't see a way. I am tired from trying to make a way. But You call into being things that are not. You bring something out of nothing. I am daring to hope in You again.

Yes, sometimes waiting and watching is all you can do. But it's not a passive thing. Cling to goodness. Dare to hope. Stuck is not the end of the story. How long will you have to wait? I can't tell you. Will you see the thing you are waiting for? I'm don't know. But I do know that Jesus is wildly good. His love won't run out on you. His faithfulness won't quit on you. Jesus is that good. He won't stand by the side of the pit, shouting down advice. No, Jesus will climb down into the pit with you. How long will you have to wait? I don't know.

But I do know that we can dare to hope in the God who gives life to the dead and who brings dead things, dead circumstances, to life, the God who calls into being things that are not. We cling to goodness. We dare to hope. Jesus is making all things new.

## STUDY GUIDE

### UNSTUCK • "Sinking Deep"

#### Psalm 40:1-5

#### **UP:** Connect With God Through Spending Time in His Word

Read aloud Psalm 40:1-95 Allow a few moments to silently reflect on what you heard. Underline or note any words or phrases that seem meaningful.

- 1) What does this passage have to say about how we become "unstuck" in life?
- 2) Reread verse 1. Describe a time when you feel like you waited for the Lord to show up. Would you say you waited "patiently?" Or would you use another word to describe this time?
- 3) How do you know when you've waited "long enough" for God to show up?
- 4) Reread verse 2. Describe a time when God lifted you out of a slimy/muddy/"stuck" place and set your feet on solid ground.
- 5) How did you know that it was God at work in this situation?

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

Reread verse 3. The psalmist declares that God's rescue results in a song of praise, and that many will be led to faith because of this. How have you been able to give God glory through the sharing of your story? How has this served as a testimony for the people in your life who don't know Jesus? What role does "waiting" play in evangelism?

#### **IN:** Connect with Each Other

What practices could help you cultivate patience and give you the ability to notice God's activity in your life?