

Declaration of Dependence

Psalm 40

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One of the great documents in the minds of most Americans is the Declaration of Independence. While many have never read it in its entirety, we are familiar with its importance and significance to the United States. The signing of the Declaration of Independence on July 4th, 1776 marked the beginning of the new nation we now know as the United States of America.

The concept undergirding this declaration was the notion that the people living in America did not think it appropriate to be ruled by the British government an ocean away. Instead, they declared themselves independent and able to rule themselves. That attitude continues to be prevalent in our society today. Americans fiercely value their independence. Most are determined to ensure they needn't rely upon anyone for anything. "Pulling yourself up by your bootstraps" is the American pastime, and it is a source of pride for many.

David, however, took a very different approach to life. He understood that he could not rely only upon his own strength and abilities, because many things were outside his control. Psalm 40 speaks of these things and David's recognition of his utter dependence upon God's provision and help. As such, I think it's helpful to think of Psalm 40 as a Declaration of Dependence—and we should each consider it carefully.

Out of the Pit

David begins by describing a time when he was in deep trouble.

¹ I waited patiently for the Lord to help me, and he turned to me and heard my cry. ² He lifted me out of the pit of despair, out of the mud and the mire. He set my feet on solid ground and steadied me as I walked along. ³ He has given me a new song to sing, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see what he has done and be amazed. They will put their trust in the Lord. (Psalm 40:1-3, NLT)

This psalm doesn't give us the back story of a specific event David was describing in this psalm. With what we know of David's life, it could be any number of things! He faced a great deal of hardship, and there were many times in his life when we might imagine he felt like he was in the pit of despair. But I think it's possible that the details are not included so that we can place ourselves in David's shoes.

James Montgomery Boice, the late pastor from Philadelphia, helpfully observed that we can find ourselves in the pit of despair in a variety of ways. And in each of them, the Lord is our hope.

The pit of sin. You may find yourself mired in sin that you just can't seem to get out of. David understood this pit. It's a frustrating cycle of failure, regret, and shame followed by a feeling of utter helplessness. The Lord is our help in the pit of sin.

The pit of failure. Most of us face failures at different times in life. Those failures can take any number of forms, from losing your job, to failing a class, to seeing your marriage crumble, to simply not accomplishing a goal in the timeframe you'd planned. Most of us are familiar with these feelings of failure. David was too—but again, he points to the Lord as our help.

The pit of bad habits. Maybe you feel like a slave to a pattern you've built over decades. You see no way out of the mess you've made and are tempted to throw up your hands in despair. The Lord can lead you out of the pit and into a new life.

The pit of circumstances. Sometimes life is just hard. Sometimes, through no fault of your own, you find yourself in very difficult circumstances. These times are demoralizing, because it feels like no matter what you do, you just can't get ahead.¹

Whatever pit you are in, David holds out his experience to you. He faced many of the same pits (maybe even to a greater degree) but continued to see the Lord's faithfulness. He did not try to pull himself up by his bootstraps, because he recognized he couldn't free himself from the pit he was in. He needed the Lord's help, and he eventually received it!

What I find surprising in David's statement is the phrase that he waited patiently for the Lord to help him, but that he also was crying out to God for help. This strange juxtaposition is, I think, quite instructive. It is possible to be consistent in pouring out our hearts to the Lord, crying out to Him and asking Him to act, while also maintaining an attitude of patience.

What does that look like? How can we diligently ask for God to act while still waiting patiently? I think waiting patiently includes a few different elements.

First, persistent prayer. Waiting patiently is not a passive process, it is active. We should continue to lift our concerns to the Lord in prayer. We should ask Him to act, crying out to Him for His help, while also remembering that His plan and His timing are better than ours.

Second, unshakable faith. It is easy to tire of asking for the Lord's help when nothing seems to be happening. It is tempting to conclude He doesn't care about you or that He isn't even real. But patiently waiting means trusting that God is never late, but He is also never early. He keeps His promises, and He knows better than we do. We can pray boldly, but also humbly, as we remember that our God is trustworthy.

Third, continued obedience. Throughout the Bible we see examples of people who got tired of waiting patiently, so they tried to "help" God by taking matters into their own

¹ Adapted from: Boice, James Montgomery. *Psalms 1–41: An Expositional Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005.

hands. It never worked well. Waiting patiently means continuing to do what we know is right, even when it seems like it's not getting us anywhere.

This was what David did. He waited patiently and cried out to God. The result of this attitude in David's life was that the Lord did answer his prayer. The Lord delivered him from the pit and put him on solid ground.

His conclusion, in verse 3, was that God had given him a new song to sing so that many would see what God had done. Sometimes the reason we are in the pit is so that we will have the ability to sing about what God has done after He's delivered us! David knew his purpose was to sing God's praise. This perspective is helpful when we're in the pit—remember to look for reasons to praise the Lord, even as you wait.

God's Wondrous Deeds

David continues his declaration of dependence by recalling the Lord's faithfulness.

⁴ Oh, the joys of those who trust the Lord, who have no confidence in the proud or in those who worship idols. ⁵ O Lord my God, you have performed many wonders for us. Your plans for us are too numerous to list. You have no equal. If I tried to recite all your wonderful deeds, I would never come to the end of them. (Psalm 40:4-5, NLT)

David declares that those who trust the Lord find joy, while those who place their confidence in the proud or in idols do not. His point is simple: only the Lord can deliver on His promises. There are all sorts of people and programs that promise results: If you just follow this diet, all your problems will be gone. If you elect this candidate, they will correct all the ills in our world. If you follow this investment strategy, you'll be rich and never need to worry about money again. There are a million different examples of this. This is the essence of advertising—tell us that the thing we need is whatever they're selling, and once we have that thing, everything will be better.

David says there is joy for the person who doesn't put confidence in those things. Why? Because those who do are always disappointed! We even have a term for this: buyer's remorse. There is a thrill that comes with a major purchase or a sudden life change, but it quickly fades, and then we begin to ask if we made a mistake. We can have buyer's remorse even when our decision wasn't bad; we just quickly discover that it doesn't deliver on the promises we thought it would.

David says God never disappoints. No one ends up with buyer's remorse after placing their trust in the Lord. He always delivers on His promises. David declares that the Lord is so faithful that if he tried to recite all His wondrous deeds, he would never come to the end of them. His point is that rather than looking to the things of this world to satisfy us, provide for us, or as our source of security, confidence, or hope, we should look to the Lord. There is joy for those who trust God and do not bother with things that cannot deliver what they promise—which is everything in this world.

God's Desire from Us

David makes an incredibly insightful statement in the next verses.

⁶ You take no delight in sacrifices or offerings. Now that you have made me listen, I finally understand— you don't require burnt offerings or sin offerings.

⁷ Then I said, "Look, I have come. As is written about me in the Scriptures: ⁸ I take joy in doing your will, my God, for your instructions are written on my heart."

⁹ I have told all your people about your justice. I have not been afraid to speak out, as you, O Lord, well know. ¹⁰ I have not kept the good news of your justice hidden in my heart; I have talked about your faithfulness and saving power. I have told everyone in the great assembly of your unfailing love and faithfulness. (Psalm 40:6-10, NLT)

David says the Lord did not delight in sacrifices or offerings. That may not seem too earth-shattering to us, because we understand that real reason behind these sacrifices was to point forward to the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus. But David lived before Jesus. He lived at a time when all God had told them was about the law, part of which was the sacrifices and offerings, so this was a very significant declaration.

How could David say that God is not delighted in sacrifices or offerings when God's law commands them? David seems to have realized the same thing Jesus taught: when we treat the law as a checklist for how to appease God, we are missing the point. God does not desire us to check things off a list, He desires our hearts! When our hearts are seeking God, we will do those things, but it's not the rituals themselves that bring God joy, it's the hearts of His people.

This is a message we still need to hear today, because many still get this wrong. We have a list of things "good Christians" do. They go to church, read their Bible, go to Sunday School, give offerings to the Lord, watch their language, get baptized, take communion, become a member of the church. Sometimes we figure if we do these things, the Lord will be pleased (or appeased). But none of these things, on their own, is of any value whatsoever if our hearts are not committed to the Lord.

These are all good things Christians should do, but they must be a byproduct of a heart that is devoted to Christ, not merely a means to earn God's favor. A person who performs all the rituals and looks like a super Christian on the outside but has a heart that is far from the Lord does not please God. David seems to have understood this, even before Christ entered the world.

David also understood another important principle, which was that his purpose was to point others to the wonders of our God. Each time God did something, each time God answered prayer, each time David saw the hand of the Lord move, his job was to tell others about God's faithfulness! He said these things were not designed for him to keep to himself, but to proclaim to others!

I would challenge you to think about what things you could tell others about the Lord's faithfulness. When you think about God's greatness, what most moves you? Once you

have a good sense of why you see the Lord's greatness and how you have seen Him move in your life, begin sharing that with others. Pay attention for openings to share your story. Your story is not just for you, it's to point others to God's greatness as well.

Another Patient Cry

The last section of this psalm is another cry out to the Lord for His help.

¹¹ Lord, don't hold back your tender mercies from me. Let your unfailing love and faithfulness always protect me. ¹² For troubles surround me— too many to count! My sins pile up so high I can't see my way out. They outnumber the hairs on my head. I have lost all courage. ¹³ Please, Lord, rescue me! Come quickly, Lord, and help me. ¹⁴ May those who try to destroy me be humiliated and put to shame. May those who take delight in my trouble be turned back in disgrace. ¹⁵ Let them be horrified by their shame, for they said, "Aha! We've got him now!" ¹⁶ But may all who search for you be filled with joy and gladness in you. May those who love your salvation repeatedly shout, "The Lord is great!" ¹⁷ As for me, since I am poor and needy, let the Lord keep me in his thoughts. You are my helper and my savior. O my God, do not delay. (Psalm 40:11-17, NLT)

These concluding verses are another example of David asking for God's help. He again recognizes that he is in over his head and asks God to deliver him. David asks the Lord to deliver him from his sins, which have piled up so high that he can't see his way out. He asks the Lord for courage and help. He asks Him to silence and vanquish his enemies, who are seeking to do him harm. He reminds himself that he is poor and needy (not something you would expect a king to say), and that his only hope is God.

These few verses help us see David's heart as he patiently cries out to God. I hope this serves as an example for you. We can be honest with the Lord, pouring out our hearts toward Him. Do not feel like you cannot cry out to Him, being honest about the concerns, the fears, or the frustration on your heart. David even asks the Lord not to delay in answering his prayer. The great key to David's prayer is something that isn't explicitly stated. Undergirding his prayer was his confidence that the Lord was in control and would answer. We can be persistent and bold in our prayers while also being patient. We can find peace, even as we long for the Lord to act. But the only way that can happen is for us to recognize that He is faithful, He hears our prayers, and He will act...just not always in our timing. But as we wait, we are challenged to remember that God's timing is perfect.

Conclusion

There is a good chance that either you are currently in a pit of despair or there may be one somewhere on the horizon. Such pits are part of life. The Bible gives us many examples of times David dealt with such pits, and there were surely many more times that weren't recorded. Since this is a part of the human experience, we should be prepared with a plan for how to respond when we find ourselves mired in the mud. Here are the steps I'd recommend for you.

First, rehearse God's faithfulness. Read the story of David. Read the story of Job. Reflect on the lives of the disciples. Read Paul's experience with suffering. And see what ultimately happened. Each of these people saw the Lord move in their lives. Each of them was reminded that they didn't walk alone. Each eventually saw how God's timing and His plan is perfect. You serve the same God. He loves you just as He did David and Job and Paul. His plan is still perfect. Remind yourself of His faithfulness so you can rest in the knowledge that He's working even when you can't see it.

Second, cry out to Him in prayer. When times get hard, we often begin grasping for anything we think might help us. We turn to the internet for advice, or our friends, or we begin scheming. Often this leads us into even deeper trouble! Instead looking around for something we hope might work, we should turn to the One who we *know* can help us! We should do what David did and pour out our hearts to God. Share your fears with Him. Share your frustrations. Tell Him about the things you don't understand. Ask Him to act. At the same time, remind yourself that you can cry out to Him and wait patiently at the same time. The more we come to Him in this way, the more we will be reminded that He is faithful and His timing is perfect. God answers prayer. So don't allow delays to stop you from praying. Choose to believe that God is teaching you and working through the delay. Remember He is never late, but He's also never early.

Third, keep doing what is right. David is a wonderful example of this. When King Saul was trying to kill him, David could have easily taken him down on several occasions. He had advisors telling him that he would be justified in his actions because Saul had started it. To David's credit, he refused to listen to those advisors. He continued to be obedient to the Lord, he continued to do what he knew was right, because he knew that the Lord would ultimately vindicate him. He did not need to resort to evil tactics to get his way and knew that doing so probably would not work out well for him.

We should do the same when we face trials. Many will try to tell you that your sinful actions or attitudes are justified. They aren't. When trials come, don't lose sight of the Lord, and don't try to justify sinful behavior because of a difficult time or the actions of others. Keep doing what is right because you know the Lord will ultimately honor it.

Finally, sing His praises when He delivers you! The last part of your plan for the hard times is to plan for the day when the Lord answers your prayer, because you know He will. Keep your eyes fixed on the fact that the Lord will act, and that He is worthy of your praise. Refuse to take credit for what God has done but plan to use that opportunity to point others to His greatness.

In a world that celebrates independence, the Bible holds out a different approach. It says we should celebrate and embrace our dependence upon the Lord. David reminds us that real strength is not found in trying to go it alone; it is found in patiently waiting on the Lord. That seems contrary to everything our world says today, but God's track record is pretty good—and it shows that He's worth trusting, depending on, and waiting on in every situation.

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