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Introduction

I was about 18, and I was just so excited. I was finally going to see my favourite rock group, U2, live in concert at the Sydney Entertainment centre. I had all their albums. I knew many of the lyrics of their songs off by heart. I had followed them for years. But now I was going to hear them perform, live.

And it was a great show. U2 by then were just about challenging for the title of most popular band in the world. And their speciality was their live performances. They played three encores that night. And the last one was not one of their biggest hits or one of their well known anthems. It was a song from their second album many years before, a song called 40.

And the words were taken straight out of Psalm 40. *I waited patiently for the Lord, he inquired and heard my cry, he lifted me up out of the pit, out of the miry clay. I will sing, sing a new song. How long to sing this song? How long, how long, how long, how long to sing this song? He set my feet upon a rock, he made my foot steps firm. Many will see, many will see and hear. I will sing a new song.*

Here was the ancient Psalm, still speaking to a modern world. Here was the lead singer, in front of 10,000 adoring fans, applying the wait of the Psalmist in Psalm 40, to his own situation in Ireland. How long will he have to wait? How long will it take for Ireland to stop tearing itself apart? When will God finally hear the prayer of the Irish people and bring them peace?

That's one of the things I like about the Psalms. They are not dry as dust. They are not just conveying information. They are personal. They are passionate. They are real. And they can easily be applied to our everyday situations.

1. The Pit (verses 1-2)

Look for example at Psalm 40. A Psalm of David, written some 3,000 years ago. But words that resonate with many of us today. *I waited patiently for the Lord, he turned to me and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the slimy pit.* How often have we waited for the Lord to do something? How often have we found ourselves in the pits, in a hole, stuck in the mud and the clay and the mire?

We may not have been physically stuck in quick sand, or caught down a mine shaft, helpless and unable to get out. But we know what it is like to feel trapped. Stuck. Helpless. Unable to get out of a situation. Unable to do anything to help.

For life is like that sometimes, isn't it? We are up against a health problem, that the doctors can't seem to get to the bottom of. We are exhausted by what life has thrown at us and we have no energy to go on. We are stuck in the middle of relationship problems and there is no light at the end of the tunnel. Yes life is sometimes like that,

isn't it?

It happens to us all at some time or other. Kurt Cobain was the lead singer of a grunge band called, "Nirvana". He tragically took his own life in an act of suicide. Despite his widespread fame, great wealth and adulation as a rock star he grew terribly lonely and depressed. In the days leading up to his suicide one of his diary entries read: "Somebody, anybody, God help, help me please. I want to be accepted...I'm so tired of crying and dreaming, I'm so, so, alone."

David, even David, a man of God felt like that. Sometimes it was his own fault. Remember this is the man who committed adultery with Bathsheba and then murdered her husband and was caught out by Nathan the prophet. And sometimes it was other people's fault as when Saul his mentor and then later Absalom his son, were doing everything they possibly could to destroy him. But no matter whose fault it is, it's a terribly, terribly dark place to be.

And sometimes when we are caught in that sort of a pit, God doesn't seem to be in a hurry to do something about it. Phillips Brooks, a Baptist pastor in Boston in the late 1800's, when asked one day, the reason for his agitation famously said, "The trouble is I'm in a hurry, but God isn't." Can you relate to that? Being in a hurry for something to happen and God is telling us to be patient.

But its hard to be patient. Leonardo de Vinci once said *"Patience serves as a protection against wrongs as clothes do against cold. For if you put on more clothes as the cold increases it will have no power to hurt you. So in like manner you must grow in patience when you meet with great wrongs, and they will then be powerless to vex your mind."*

Grow in patience. When we look at scripture we might start to think that waiting might be a spiritual discipline. God called the people of the past to wait patiently for Him to act. And today we are told not to expect God to do our bidding in our time, but to wait for his.

Now our culture today teaches us that we can have everything now, right now. It tells us that busyness is good and that we should take control of everything in our lives. But God says no, Remember that I am always with you, to help you out of your troubles, to steady you when you are weak, to guide you when you are lost. No, sometimes God calls us to wait, to wait patiently. He is working, he is doing something, even if we can't see at present any evidence of what he is doing.

Have you heard about the Chinese bamboo tree? You see the Chinese plant the seed; they water & fertilize it, but the first year nothing happens. The second year they water & fertilize it, & nothing happens. The third & fourth year they water & fertilize it, and nothing happens. Then the fifth year they water and fertilize it, & in a period of approximately six weeks, the Chinese bamboo trees grow roughly ninety feet.

The question is, Did it grow ninety feet in six weeks or did it grow ninety feet in five years? The obvious answer is that it grew ninety feet in five years, because had they not applied the water and the fertilizer each year, or if they gave up and planted something else, there would have been no Chinese bamboo tree.

Some things in this life take time for us to notice that God is responding. If we are impatient we will all too often give up when things seem to not be happening. It all comes down to God's timing. David understands God's times and so when he is in the pits, he waits patiently for the Lord to hear and to respond.

2. And then the pits turns into the praise (verses 3-10)

Because God hears David's prayer and lifts him out of the pit. He gives him a new foundation for his life, by placing his feet on a rock. He makes him feel safe and secure by ensuring that that he has a firm place to stand. God doesn't abandon his servant. God doesn't ignore his child's cry. God doesn't just leave us to our own devices. He intervenes. He does bless the man who puts his trust in Him. He is a God of wonders who loves to give good things to his children.

And that puts a new song in David's mouth, a hymn of praise to our God. It gives David a different perspective on life, on faith, on trust in God. Its not that the old song is wrong. It is that God continues to act in our lives, he continues to touch us where we need with his presence, he continues to answer our prayers, and so this new song is not just someone else's song, it is our song.

It is when Joseph Scriven loses his finance, the love of his life, the night before he is to marry her, that in his pain he sits down and writes, *What a friend we have in Jesus*. It is John Newton who looks back at his life as a cruel ship's captain, a slave trader, someone who had walked away from his mother's faith and sunk as low as you could go, that he writes *Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me*. It is Geoff Bullock who is the worship leader of the fastest growing Church in Sydney Hillsong, whose life suddenly veers crazily off course, who pens the words, *O Lord you guide me through all the darkness, turning my night into day. You'll never leave me, never forsake me, the power of the presence of God. Have faith in God let your hope rest in the faith he has placed in your heart. Never give up, never let of the faith he has placed in your heart*.

God places a new song in my mouth. And a new message on our tongue. So he tells forth, *the things planned for us, no one can recount to you, were I to speak and tell of them they would be too many to declare*.

Looking back at what God has done should bring about praise. Thanks. Witness. If you don't want to sing, to declare, to share, there is something wrong, really wrong. Its good news. For you can't keep good news to yourself. You have to tell others. But David says it can't even stop there, it has to go further, much further.

He could bring a sacrifice, a costly sacrifice to the altar, but that isn't enough. He go and make an offering of grain or of money, but there's nothing personal in that. For God wants more than my cash, or my crops, or even just my repentance. He wants to pierce my ear, he wants me to open my ears to what he is saying to me. But more than that, he wants my life, my soul, my all. *Here I am, I have come, I desire to do your will O my God, your law is within my heart*.

Nothing less than my all is good enough. Nothing less will cut the mustard. For the

NT reminds us that to get us out of the pit of sin, Jesus jumped in and took our place. To enable us to escape from our enemies, Jesus went into enemy territory, death, in our place, to blow it to smithereens. In order to deal with our half heartedness, our lack of devotion, our love for created things rather than the creator, the Lord Jesus, the one who came from heaven, says to his father. *"Here I am, I have come, it is written about me in the scroll. I desire to do your will, O my god, your law is within my heart."*

He gave his all to you, can we give him any less than our all back to him? Apparently General William Booth, of the Salvation Army, was once asked to reveal the secret of his success. How he had defied odds and started a movement, a Christian movement, that cared about the poor, the down trodden, the down and outs. And the devout leader hesitated for a moment, then, as tears came into his eyes and ran down his face, he replied: *"I will tell you the secret. God has had all there was of me to have."*

"There may have been men with greater opportunities; but from the day I got the poor of London on my heart, and a vision of what Jesus Christ could do, I made up my mind that God would have all there was of William Booth. If there is anything of power in the Salvation Army today, it is because God has had all the adoration of my heart, all the power of my will, and all the influence of my life."

Now shouldn't that be the same for us? Not just thanks, or Church attendance, or money in the plate. But in Paul's words, offering ourselves as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God. Understanding that if God made me in the first place and if he has now bought me back after I have wandered away, then he owns me twice. And so to give yourself back to him, is only doing what Jesus has done for us. He gave his all for me, can I do anything less?

3. The Pits, the praise and lastly the plea, verses 11 to 17.

For no sooner has David pledged his voice, his song, his ears, his life back to God, than his troubles surround him again. His hearts fails within him. His enemies seek to take his life and put him to shame and ruin. He becomes again poor and needy. It is like he is back in the pits again. He is again in real need.

You see Christian faith is not an insurance policy against suffering. It doesn't mean that only good things happen to good people, to God's people. No the Christian life has its real tough times. We are not immune from the sufferings, the pain, the illnesses, the death. In fact my experience is that I have higher highs and lower lows. You feel deeply your own failings. Your love for others, breaks your heart when you see them going through tough times. The opposition from the devil comes at you with both barrels for you have deserted his side and are now supporting the opposition. But when you see the steps of faith happening in both you and others, your soul begins to really soar!

And as I read through the Psalms I'm struck by how many times the Psalmist comes through the pain and onto joy and then in a couple of verses he is back with his worries and his woes. How up and down he is! He complains, and then he remembers God's goodness. He complains again, and then he remembers how God brought him up as a child. Then right back to complaining once again, before he cries out in sheer

desperation. Twice in the one psalm he lapses into extravagant descriptions of his plight. And twice he turns his attention to his God, as his help and deliverer and his head again bobs up from under the water.

So don't listen when Christian preachers tell you God has a wonderful plan for your life and nothing bad will come near you. Don't believe people when they say, if you just think positively you can be like Teflon, troubles will not stick to you. It doesn't work that way.

In the words of a Christian writer named Carole Bonno, "*People say I am different now. I am. People say I am helping others who have had a similar loss. I am. But why couldn't I have learned these things by just reading a book?*" *Adversity is the gift that no one wants under the Christmas tree—yet sometimes it comes, anyway.*"

The rose needs the thorns and the petals. The rainbow needs the rain. The sunrise needs the darkness of the morning. The tapestry needs the light and the dark colours. But in the midst of the joys and the sorrows, God doesn't leave you or forsake you. He is your help and your deliverer. He does join you in the midst of the joy and the suffering. He sends his spirit into the very heart of our darkness. In the words of that famous poem Footprints... *The LORD replied, my precious, precious child, I Love you and I would never leave you! During your times of trial and suffering when you see only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you.*

This is why the Psalms are so great for us today to read. They speak of life in all its honesty. They display the faith of someone like David going up and down. And yet in the end they encourage us to trust God, to reach out to God, to live for God, no matter what. And they set before us the example of David, as well as the example of Jesus. The one who fulfils this Psalm perfectly.

For many years Bruce Larson worked in New York City where he was counsellor helping people with big decisions. Often, after a Session, he would suggest they walk from his office down to the RCA Building on 5th Avenue. In the entrance of that building is a gigantic statue of Atlas, the man of Greek Mythology punished by Zeus to hold the world upon his shoulders. There he is, the most powerfully built man in the world, and he can barely stand up under this burden. "Now that's one way to live, trying to carry the world on your shoulders. But now come across the street with me" he would say. On the other side of 5th Avenue is Saint Patrick's Cathedral, and there behind the high altar is a little shrine of the boy Jesus, perhaps eight or nine years old, and with no effort He is holding the world in one hand.

The application? We have a choice. We can carry the world on our shoulders, or we can say, 'I give up, Lord; here's my life. I give you my world; I give you my all.' What are we going to do? David remind us "*Blessed is the man who makes the Lord his trust...*" And ends by saying "*You are my help and my deliver, O my god, do not delay.*"