

Psalm 40

Testimony and Plea – the Christian Life Isn't a Straight Line

1. Introduction

“The theme of waiting, expounded in Psalm 37, has had its painful application in Psalms 38 and 39, but now its triumphant outcome. The rescue, pictured memorably in the opening lines, demands a fitting celebration, and David is enabled to see that no mere ritual can suffice for it: only an act of pure self-giving. This he prepares to make, with a declaration which in reality none but the Messiah will be able to fulfil, as the New Testament makes plain... But trouble returns, and waiting is again David's lot. The psalm ends with a prayer of distress” (Kidner).

2. Structure

Part 1: Praise and testimony because of past deliverance

A¹ (vv. 1-2) *I waited, and the LORD delivered!*

B¹ (v. 4) *Ultimate commitments – to trust in the LORD or in proud deceptions*

C¹ (vv. 5-10) *God's wonderful works of deliverance, and my testimony*

Part 2: Confession and plea for present deliverance

C² (vv. 11-13) *The LORD's compassion, and my need of deliverance*

B² (vv. 14-16) *Ultimate commitments – to delight in harm or in God's salvation*

A² (vv. 17) *I am waiting – may the LORD's deliverance not tarry!*

Sections C¹ and C² are both chiasmic, and they balance one another, i.e.

a¹ (v. 5) God's works of deliverance are beyond declaration

b¹ (vv. 6-8) I am consciously devoted to the will of God

a² (vv. 9-10) I have made it my practice to declare the LORD's covenant love

a³ (v. 11) May the LORD not withhold his covenant love from me

b² (v. 12) I am conscious of my failure to do the will of God

a⁴ (v. 13) LORD (because of your compassion) please deliver me

This shows that *testimony* (a²) and *plea* (a³) lie right at the heart of the Psalm as well as in its opening and closing sections (A¹ and A²). It is within this context of “testimony and plea” that David tells us about his devotion (b¹) and his awareness of disobedience (b²), and he delivers his admonition concerning the importance of ultimate commitments (B¹ and B²).

3. Message: the life of the believer isn't a straight line

If the Christian life were a straight line, then the two halves of the psalm would be the other way round – David's distress and his plea for deliverance would come first, and would be followed by his testimony of deliverance and his affirmation of his relationship with God. If the Christian life were a straight line, salvation would lead – without any deviation – to victory, joy and assurance.

But that's not the shape of the psalm. Instead, David's recollection of past deliverance collides with the fact of his present trouble. The triumphant chords of vv 1-3 are replaced by the sounds of sorrow in vv. 11-17. The effect of this is to make the Psalm feel back-to-front. It lacks the resolution we expect and desire. “The sequence is wrong. A complaint should not come after the joy of a new song.’ But this shows that ‘the move from disorientation to new orientation is not a single, straight line.... In our daily life the joy of deliverance is immediately beset and assaulted by the despair and fear of the Pit.’ Even after experiences of God's deliverance, ‘there will come days of tribulations, and of greater tribulations.... Let no one promise himself what the Gospel does not promise’” (Goldingay, quoting Bruggemann and Augustine).

The tension created by the shape of the psalm “must not be treated as non-existent by dividing up the psalm into several portions, which are then attributed to different authors and situations. On the contrary, the tension is of the essence of faith and is the mark of the genuine and active piety of a biblical worshipper, who is led over the heights and through the depths of a life lived by faith and progresses from experience to hope. This is the spiritual situation in the light of which the psalm is to be understood as a unity and as being true to life” (Weiser).

4. Messianic interpretation

In the light of David's profession of devotion in vv. 6-8, and his understanding that God values obedience above sacrifice, consider the following sequence:

- In 1 Samuel 13 Saul is rebuked for his first act of disobedient sacrifice; Samuel says to him (v. 14), “The LORD has sought out a man after his own heart.”
- In 1 Samuel 15 Saul is rebuked for his second act of disobedient sacrifice; Samuel asks (v. 22), “Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD?”
- In 1 Samuel 16 God tells Samuel that in selecting a king “the LORD looks on the heart” (v. 7).
- In Acts 13:22-23 Paul applies Psalm 89:20 to Jesus: “‘I have found in David the son of Jesse a man after my heart, who will do all my will.’ Of this man's offspring God has brought to Israel a Saviour, Jesus.”

The author of the letter to the Hebrews makes a Messianic application of vv. 6-8, first quoting them (Heb. 10:5-7, albeit writing “a body you have prepared for me” rather than “my ears you have pierced”) and then applying them to Jesus (Heb. 10:8-10). Jesus alone has the inherent right to singing vv. 1-10; vv. 14-15 describe our fallen nature; but because of *his* obedience, we get to sing the whole psalm.