

The birthplace of faith

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[0 : 01] Shall we turn now to the book of Psalms, chapter 40. The book of Psalms, the 40th chapter and the opening verses.

I waited patiently for the Lord and inclined unto me and heard my cry. He brought me up also out of a horrible pit, out of the mighty clay, and set my feet upon a rock and established my goings.

And he had put a new song in my mouth, even praise unto our God. Many shall see it and fear and shall trust in the Lord.

We now read these verses again, this time from the contemporary English version of the scripture. I patiently waited, Lord, for you to hear my prayer. You listened and pulled me from a lonely pit, full of madden mire.

You let me stand on a rock with my feet firm. And you gave me a new song, a song of praise to you. Many will see this, and they will honor and trust you, the Lord God.

[1 : 15] We are constantly reminded each time we switch on the television news or read our national newspapers, that the world in which we live is a world which seems to go from one crisis to another.

Even as we speak, there is a crisis in Northern Ireland. There is a crisis in Bosnia. There is a crisis in and around Rwanda.

So we could go on. There are crises. Such is the history of the human race, due to the influence of sin, that we, having failed to love God, we begin to hate one another.

A crisis is defined in the dictionary as a turning point, a moment of danger or suspense. And there are many moments of danger and suspense in the world today.

And sometimes it is difficult for us, when we watch the news and the relative comfort and security of our living rooms, to realize just how dangerous and just how tension-filled is the society which we are watching through the lens of the camera.

[2 : 49] But when we contrast the situation that obtains in the world of the newspapers and television newsmen with our religious life, very often we are conscious of our different atmosphere.

It is true that out in the church from time to time, crises. But these are relatively rare. The vast majority of people involved in the church of Jesus Christ today, live lives which are characterized by custom, routine, if not plain humdrum.

So often we attend church from one week to another, from one month to another, and from one year to another. And there is scarcely anything to cause a ripple on the surface.

We go through the motions. We attend church. We read our Bibles. We pray. We seek to love our neighbor and possibly do a lot more. And life continues as normal.

I suspect that many a non-Christian looking at all of us would never guess from our witness that Christ has called us to extraordinary living.

[4 : 09] One of the problems today is that we have become so accustomed to the routine that we automatically accept it as the norm, even as God's norm for us.

While around us, crises are forging the shape of secular history. Within us, our spiritual history often moves very slowly, if not grind to our standstill.

There is a sense in which this is unhealthy. Because we see from this psalm and from other passages of scripture that so often, crises in the life of the church produce faith, or stimulate faith.

So often in the life of the church, the church rises to the occasion in the power of the Spirit of God when it is confronted with crisis. Miguel de Unamuno, the well-known Spanish existentialist philosopher of earlier this century and the end of last century, wrote in his book *The Tragic Sense of Life*.

And may God deny you peace, but give you glory. And so often we opt for peace rather than glory. We ask God, as it were, to deny us glory, that we may enjoy peace.

[5 : 35] But so often our peace is the peace of slumber. We see from this passage in the book of Psalms that it was a crisis which brought the psalmist to faith.

And again and again in the scriptures we discover that spiritual crises are part and woof of our calling to follow God. It is as we are ready to face spiritual danger and undergo spiritual tensions that these crises become the birthplace of faith.

And so often we find ourselves faithless just because we refuse to give faith the opportunity to be born within us through fearless confrontation with crisis.

Our religion has become rather comfortable and we do not want to be disturbed. I remember many years ago an evangelical minister in the Church of Scotland on one of the main streets in one of the cities of this land.

Put up a big placard outside the church which said this church is dangerous. A lot of people thought that the spire was about to come down. But in fact he believed that the gospel would turn people's lives upside down.

[7 : 03] And that those who would enter that church would hear the gospel and would find their lives in danger. This was perhaps an unusual and even a sensational step.

But he felt that he had to do something startling to communicate to the members of his church that God was calling them to risk danger for him.

Now the opening words of this psalm, Psalm 40, one of the best known psalms in the Psalter constituted a frank biography of some profound spiritual crisis experienced by the psalmist.

I'm sure that we might profitably study them just for a few moments this evening. What exactly was the nature of the crisis that brought forth this psalm from the lips of the psalmist?

Well there are various possibilities, various interpretations. And I want to mention the three main interpretations of what the crisis was this evening.

[8 : 06] The first is the most obvious that the psalmist here refers to a literal pit into which he fell on one of his journeys. David you remember was a man of the country.

He was brought up as a shepherd. He was accustomed to being out on the hillside watching over the sheep of his father. And then, for many years, for ten years, he was hunted and harried by Saul out of jealousy.

This undoubtedly meant that he had to travel over uncharted territory and treacherous trails. We are told that at one time, dangerous quagmires were very common in Palestine that constantly endangered the life of the traveler who wandered from the accepted routes.

These bogs had a fearful reputation. Slowly but surely, they would suck their helpless victims down into their slimy depths.

The more they struggled, the faster they sunk. Now according to this first and most literal interpretation, the crisis of the psalmist is some personal misfortune involving physical danger.

[9 : 21] David accidentally falls into one of these treacherous slime pits. Attention and suspense are there. The slime slowly sucking its helpless victim down to a horrible death.

There in that moment in which David was face to face with eternity, eyeball to eyeball with death, he calls upon God, not in the leisurely fashion suggested by some of the translations which say that he waited patiently for the Lord.

It can equally well be translated desperately. He waited, I hope, desperately for the Lord. He called out in nothing short of intense desperation.

And the Lord heard him and delivered him. How? We're not told. Perhaps God sent some unknown helper who heard his cry at that moment and was able to rescue him as Jeremiah was rescued from the pit into which Zedekiah had permitted him to be thrown.

Perhaps God intervened miraculously and David was delivered supernaturally. We don't know. But what we do know is that David testifies that in that awful moment of danger the Lord answered his desperate plea for rescue.

[10 : 41] And that in that crisis faith was born and reborn in the soul of David. I suppose that crisis involving physical danger are not common to most of us.

It is true that sometimes I suppose that we do find ourselves in physical danger. Almost certainly our misfortune is not identical with that of David because our circumstances are so very different from his.

Nevertheless, our life can at times be threatened suddenly by an act, by illness or by accident. Or it may be that the life of a loved one is suddenly snatched away.

On the other hand, it may not be physical life which is at stake. It could be that our reputation or our economic security has suddenly crashed to the ground.

Whatever it may be, something hits us and knocks us off balance. We find our world being turned upside down and we're face to face with a new and grim horrible reality.

[11 : 51] The important question I want to ask you is I want to ask myself tonight is how do we face this kind of thing? Is this experience an experience which makes or breaks our faith?

Too often, the harsh judgments and cruel injustices of life can break people's faith to God, driving them into religious indifference, even into militant atheism.

But not so with the psalmist, not so with David. This psalm shows us how a true faith with his vision riveted on the Messiah reacts. Rather than his faith being demolished, that faith was deepened by the crisis because in a new desperation it sought the face and the help of God.

about 90 years ago, a Chicago lawyer called Horatio Spafford received a cable from his wife.

He's a Christian businessman. His wife and his four daughters were crossing the Atlantic by a steamship. The steamship went down after a collision with a sailing vessel.

[13 : 08] By some miracle his wife was saved but the four children drowned. After landing on the Welsh coast the wife sent her husband the following cable in two words Saved Alone.

That was an enormous crisis for that man. What would he do? Would he give up his faith? Would he say that God didn't care?

No. He sat down and he penned verses which are still sung today almost a century later throughout the English-speaking world.

The words of the hymn When peace like a river attendeth my way when sorrows like sea billows roll whatever my lot thou hast taught me to say is well is well with my soul.

And not only did Horatius Spafford write a hymn he also gave himself over to missionary service. And for the remaining years of his life he served as a missionary in Israel.

[14 : 17] And still in Jerusalem today you can visit his home. He was a wealthy man and he had a beautiful home which is today an hotel in East Jerusalem.

And in that hotel you can see the story of his life recorded in pictures. that crisis when that man lost his four daughters in the Atlantic was a crisis which far from destroying his faith strengthened it and brought him to the point of making a new commitment to the service of God.

And for the remaining years of his life he served the Lord in Israel and his wife many years after him I think she lived until the mid 1920s.

Family still well known for their Christian philanthropy and Christian testimony in that part of the world. So this is the first interpretation that David fell into a literal pit that there was a physical accident that the crisis which is described here was a literal one.

The second interpretation is that the psalmist is here speaking figuratively speaking of an unjust imprisonment just as Jeremiah was imprisoned in a pit or in a well because the Hebrew word for pit can also mean dungeon but what Jeremiah tells us it is clear that the dungeons were in fashion that dungeons were in fashion in the ancient Israel.

[15 : 56] We read the story of how that faithful prophet did not hesitate to proclaim the word of the Lord even when it ran counter to the interests of the royal household and how he refused to be silenced even by royal command and then his ministry was suddenly gagged by imprisonment by the king's advisors.

Do you remember how we read they took Jeremiah and put him into an underground cistern belonging to the royal prince Malkiah below the guard house loading him down with ropes the cistern held no water only mud and Jeremiah sunk in the mud Jeremiah in the book of Lamentations tells us himself what this experience was like and he quote I've been hunted like a bird he says by those who were my enemies without cause they flung me into the pit and cast stones at me water closed over my head I said I am lost indeed so close is the experience of Jeremiah to the experience of the psalmist in Psalm 40 that some people wonder whether it may not have been Jeremiah who wrote Psalm 40 though it says a psalm of David the Hebrew could also mean a psalm dedicated to David but we cannot answer that question with any certainty be that as it made it clear that it is possible legitimately for us to interpret the crisis of the psalmist as an unjust and inhumanitarian imprisonment these cisterns or these pits were water holes and in the wet season they filled with water and as the water was used during the dry season they were left but there was mud accumulated in the bottom of them and they became useful temporary prisons for those who had them in fact if any of you have been to

Israel today and visited the house or what is believed to be the site of the house of Caiaphas where Jesus was tried there is a cistern there which you can go down into and tradition has it that the Lord was kept in that cistern while he was awaiting his trial you get some ideas it's got a it's like a bottle dungeon a narrow hole at the top and it widens out these cisterns were dug out of the limestone as reservoirs water and a city like Jerusalem was heavily dependent upon these systems before modern water engineering was introduced the Alcatraz would compare favorably with Jeremiah's pit I'm sure many of you may have visited St. Andrews and in St. Andrews visited the castle and in the castle seen the bottle dungeon in which John Knox was imprisoned there more than 400 years ago for reasons remarkably similar to those which led to

Jeremiah's fate in Jerusalem how these prisoners with John Knox survived in that horrible cavern with only a tiny hole at the top to act as a window and doorway is perhaps better left and imagined however the efforts of the Jewish king Zedekiah to break the faith of Jeremiah through imprisonment were no more successful than those of the French captors of John Knox the crisis imprisonment of both these men of God only served to call out more into the open the depth and strength of their faith Jeremiah tells us that while in the dungeon he called out to God I called on thy name O Lord from the depths of the pit thou didst hear my plea do not close thine ear to my cry for help thou didst come near when I called on thee thou didst say do not fear thou hast taken up my cause

O Lord thou hast redeemed my life Lamentations chapter 3 again in the verses of the psalm we have the psalmist's words I waited earnestly before the Lord inclined to me and heard my cry he drew me up from the desolate pit out of the mighty bog and set my feet upon a rock making my steps secure I believe it is important for us to remember that the Bible speaks not only of the imprisonment of Jeremiah in the dungeon but it presents to us the uncomfortable and inescapable truth that there is a sense in which all of us are prisoners all of us are moral prisoners anyone who takes the standards of Jesus seriously and applies them to his or her life has to admit that they are a prisoner this is not the imprisonment of the soul and the body so loathed by the Greek philosophers rather it is the imprisonment of the whole personality soul and body being bound and tied down within the realm of moral possibility this is the idea behind what Paul calls sin sin is literally to miss the mark it's a figure that he borrowed from the realm of archery of the archers straining to hit the target with the arrow however much they try the arrow always fell short of its target and this is the picture that he presents to us when he said as we read in

[21 : 56] Romans chapter 3 all have sinned and come short of the glory of God all have missed the mark and it's not just a question of trying to be a little bit more earnest to try to be a little bit more sincere to try to be a little bit more religious because no matter how hard or how we may try or how sincere we may be we still fall short all have sinned and come short of the glory of God why is it that we fall short it is because whosoever commits sin says Jesus is the slave of sin or the prisoner of sin simply because we cannot perfectly obey God's law or live up to the teaching of Jesus no matter how earnestly we endeavour or how sincerely we try like the archers of Paul's metaphor we don't make it something in our nature which the Bible calls sin pulls us back and makes us its prisoner

Paul explains this vividly in Romans chapter 7 he gives us there his own spiritual biography in which he expresses his sense of spiritual imprisonment I do not understand my own actions he says for I do not do what I want but I do the very thing I hate I do not do the good I want but the evil I do not want is what I do he sums this up towards the end of the chapter sums up this failure as being due to the fact that sin dwelt in him and not only dwelt in him but dominated him and enslaved him as it does us all however just as in the case of Jeremiah this crisis brought Paul to the place of faith you remember how in spiritual anguish he cried out from the very depths of his being wretched man that I am who will deliver me from this body of death and it is with his faith that he replies to that question thanks be to

God through Jesus Christ our Lord it is Jesus who comes to us and lifts us from the pit it is Jesus who comes to us and lifts us from the pit of sin and of failure before God and enables us to stand in the presence of God clothed with his righteousness washed in his blood it is he who enables us to be delivered from this spiritual bondage thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord starting and humilizing revelation that we by nature cannot keep God's laws no matter how hard we may try the crisis of conviction into which this failure before God plunges us should serve to bring us to the feet of Christ who alone can liberate us from the power of sin this is what Paul meant when he said the purpose of the law is to lead us to Christ this is what Charles

Wesley meant when he sang these words long my imprisoned spirit lay fast bound in sin and nature's night thine eye diffused a quickening ray I woke the dungeon plain with light my chains fell off my heart was free I rose went forth and followed thee a Christian life in a very real sense is a series of spiritual crisis humiliating crisis but at the same time liberating because they serve to bring us to an end of ourselves leaving us helpless at the feet of Jesus so that we in our desperation might cry out to him to take over our life in this way the crisis of spiritual failure should lead us to a renewed and more earnest commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ for us as for Jeremiah and as for Paul crisis should be the birthplace of faith but there is one final interpretation which we have to note here tonight one third interpretation of the background to the words at the beginning of Psalm 40 this interpretation would say that these words were occasioned by a severe illness an almost fatal illness the word pit in Hebrews in addition to its literal meaning and the secondary meaning of dungeon which we have already noticed can also mean the grave and in fact it is used not infrequently in this sense for example in Psalm 28 verse 1 the psalmist cries to thee

O Lord I call my rock be not death to me lest if thou be silent to me I become like those who go down to the pit the idea is to go down to the grave to die in this sense if this is the sense then the illness was so grave the shadow of death so dark the tomb so imminent the psalmist considers his recovery as a rescue from the grave itself there at the frontier between life and death there in the very process of dying at the eleventh hour the Lord lifts him as it were right out of the tomb so the psalmist is giving thanks to God for having been delivered from some dreadful illness which brought him to the very bridge of death the words of the psalmist could have been as we've seen those of a traveler sinking in a quagmire or they could have been the words of a prisoner locked in a dungeon and now we see that they could also have been the words of a dying man on the brink of eternity at first sight it may be difficult to apply this last interpretation to our everyday lives because for the most part all of us live lives which are reasonably healthy however there is a very real sense in which apart from Jesus

[28 : 22] Christ all of us are dying people I had the privilege just a fortnight ago of returning to Peru and visiting some old haunts there one of the places I passed was once the prison we lived in Peru in the 1960s it was the prison and during the period we were there the prison was knocked down great high walls were knocked down and they knocked all the walls down until they came to what had been the chapel of the prison and the people knocking down the walls the demolition contractors discovered in the chapel a painting which a prisoner had made of the crucifixion it was quite an extraordinary painting it was typical of three crosses and three people dying on the cross but what was unique about this painting was that the crucifiers had the paleness of death and it was

Jesus on the cross who had all the aspects of life the point that was being made by that unknown artist was that it was the men who crucified Jesus who were dying spiritually but as Jesus all go dying in truth was on the verge of resurrection and it was he who was living and they who were dead and there is a sense in which all of us are dying apart from Jesus Christ as living death is a direct result of the imprisonment we have already referred to all prisoners are imprisoned because of a sentence which has been made against them our sentence is spiritual death all have sinned and the wages of sin is death not only physical death but spiritual death eternal separation from God here we enter the supreme crisis of religious experience that which occurs we are lost apart from Jesus

Christ and that until he saves us we are experiencing a living death we are torturing on the brink of an eternal grave nothing can compensate for this death should finally claim us what shall let profit a man said Jesus even though he gain the whole world and lose his own soul but we praise God tonight that we are gathered here around the gospel of Jesus Christ which tells us that a spiritual crisis can become the birthplace of faith it is true that Paul delivers to us the terrible sentence of heaven the wages of sin is death but thank God that in the same breath he goes on to announce the glory of the gospel saying the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord and surely it is this grim confrontation between a man and the reality of his own guilt and lostness in the sight of God that so often a desperate life seeking faith in Christ is born this faith is a turning to God and results in deliverance from the wrath which is to come it is that act which summons every faculty of our being to rid us of our sin and selfishness and lostness by throwing ourselves desperately upon the mercy of

God in Jesus Christ so the psalmist tells us that while he waited upon the Lord while he cried out to the Lord for help the Lord heard him and pulled him out of that fearful pit and out of the mighty clay and the promise of the gospel is that if we cry out to the Lord tonight he will hear us he has promised to hear us and he has promised not only to hear us but he has promised to respond to us and to lift and to lift us to take us out of the pit of sin and of guilt out of the prison of sin and of guilt to set our feet upon the rock which is the gospel of Jesus Christ tonight by the grace of God and with the authority of God's holy word

I can say to you that if you cry out to the Lord the Lord has promised to hear you and the Lord will lean down and give you his hand and lift you out of the pit the catechism tells us that faith embraces Jesus Christ we tend to shake hands when we meet one another in this country but in many Latin countries you not only shake hands but you embrace people you give people a little hug and to a faith in Jesus Christ is not simply to extend our hand to him although that is the beginning of faith it's also to embrace him to give him everything that we are and everything that we have so tonight the gospel comes to us again tells us that if we cry out to God

[34 : 29] God will hear us God will stretch out his hand God offers us his hand tonight to rescue us and if you realize how desperate if you realize how dangerous if you realize how awful your condition without Christ is you will put out your hand and grasp his hand and ask him to lift you out of the fearful pit and out of the mighty clay place your feet upon the rock may God grant that tonight there may be some here upon whom God will lay his hand and he will lift them and place them upon the rock let us pray our gracious Lord and God and Father in heaven we come and give thanks for the gospel of the Lord Jesus which is able to lift us from the fearful pit and from the miry clay to place our feet upon the rock and to establish our goings and to put a new song in our hearts grant oh Lord that tonight there may be some here who may thus be rescued they may thus be delivered from sin and from guilt and that they may indeed be placed they have their feet placed upon the rock may a new song be given to them grant oh

Lord that as a result of that transaction these transactions in this place there may be many who will hear and honour the Lord we ask this in his name and for his sake Amen