

The Perfect Sacrifice (Psalm 40: Hebrews 10:5-10)

Introduction

Psalm 40 comes in a cluster of Psalms at the end of the first book of the Psalms (1-40), all by David and all imploring God for his help.

The early verses (say 1-5) are well known and much loved. They are the basis for a song we often sing at Eden 'When I was lost..' It would be easy to think from that song that the Psalm is just a celebration of deliverance. But as we look at what follows verses 1-5 we find it is a bit more varied than that.

One special feature is the way the movement from the (resolved) past to the (unresolved) present. The final verse (17) is a highly realistic mixture of pathetic frailty and hope. The U2 song "40" captures a bit more of the complexity of the Psalm because after reciting God's deliverance it asks 'How long to sing this song?'

The second special feature is the section (6-8) about human self-offering pleasing God in a way animal sacrifices cannot. This is quoted in Hebrews 10 and applied to Jesus in his incarnation and cross.

Structure and summary

V1-10 Past need and how the Lord met it through trust

Need, Faith and Rescue (1-3)

- v.1 a He waiting for the Lord
- v. 1b-2 The Lord set him free
- v. 3 His happy song and its hearers

Positive Generalisation from his experience (4-5)

- v. 4 If anyone trusts in the Lord (rather than human beings) he is blessed
- v.5 This blessing has been a sequence of remarkable past rescues and God is planning for the same pattern to be repeated

Response

- v.6 God wants not animal sacrifices but a listening ear and...
- v.7-8 A Leader totally open to do his will
- v.9-10 This leader will tell others about God's salvation

Vv11-17 Present need and how the Lord has to be trusted all over again

v.10-12 David's terrible present situation pushes him right back where he was – desperately calling out to God.

vv.13-16 Not only does he have troubles and sins to worry about, he has to face opposition which is both verbal and violent. For the sake of God's honour among his people he begs the Lord to reverse this.

v. 17 He ends the Psalm pleading for help because he is in such need.

Suggestions for study

As in the video, it is good for people to read the Psalm and then discuss what they think David's present state as he wrote would mostly likely have been.

The key observation is that the opening verses refer to the past not the present. The present is not shown until v. 12. As that penny drops, the suggested approach is

1. To focus on the detail of v.12 with its graphic imagery and see how that imagery affects us – how much can we identify with it.
2. To put that with v. 1-3 and see how David is trying to use the past to help him with the present. There is a profound practical tactic here that we too can use!

Then I suggest you invite people to enjoy thinking about his reflections (4-5) on that past experience of salvation as ones we can appropriate as we think of our salvation experience.

But all the time, we have verses 6-8 to try to understand. It would be good to look at the bits of detail which show David is writing and acting not simply as a believer but as a leader – see for instance the 'many' in v3 who hear him singing, or his public proclamation in the 'great assembly (in both v 9 and v 10).

With that background, reread verses 6-8. What does David say about sacrifice? How do we square that with the whole OT temple sacrificial system? What does he offer that a bull or goat cannot offer? And how does he see his self-offering (v.7)? How does this all relate to the experiences of past deliverance (1-2) and present need (v12)?

After the group have puzzled a bit about these questions, ask them to turn to Hebrews 10 and read vv1-14. The danger here is that we will get lost in the detail! So the suggestion is to invite people to see how vv1-4 explain Psalm 40:6, and to answer the question: where did the OT sacrifices actually get people? Then point them to Hebrews 10: 9-10 and ask 'do some of the puzzles about how David could say those things about himself in Psalm 40:7-8, make more sense as being perfectly fulfilled in Christ'? Next look at Hebrews 10:11-15 to understand the effect of Jesus fulfilling what David was suggesting.

Now we need to make sure we apply this properly – so we look back over Psalm 40:1-5 and see it all as representing the salvation that has come to us in Christ. We might want to spend a moment sharing along the lines of vv9-10 about Christ's salvation has come to each of us – that sort of testimony is very encouraging for the group to hear.

But we cannot leave it there because Psalm 40 does not finish at verse 10, important though it is for us to declare his praise. We come back to 11-17. Some people think this was bolted onto 1-10 by someone who was emotionally colour blind and couldn't see the differences between the two sections. But there is no evidence for that and it is appropriate and helpful to see how a believer can feel in a truly vulnerable place, even though he or she has seen God work in the past, and has been saved by the work of Christ.

We might want to ask people to think about how much v. 12 is something that repeats in their experience. And to see this as part of the pattern of v5 – God's wonderful future plans for us almost invariably mean a repeated cycle of need, crying out, waiting and receiving.

By now time will be going, so the suggestion is that you look together at v. 13 and see how it is echoed and developed in v.17. At the end of the Psalm he is back in the early stages of that past experience – trying to wait patiently for the Lord. Look together at the different phrases and try to build up a composite picture of what he says.

It would be good to ask the group whether they pray words like those of v. 13 and v. 17 or just feel that way, and further to ask what difference it would make to take words like these actually onto their lips or say them in their hearts. It would also be good to draw down what we saw about Jesus fulfilment of vv 6-8 and to connect verses 13 and 17 with Jesus too, remembering perhaps both his loud cries for help (Hebrews 5:7) and his understanding of how we feel (Hebrews 4:14-16).