

Homiletics Analysis: Psalms 40

Content & Intent

This Text — Content:

Psalm 40 moves through three distinct phases. In the first movement (vv. 1–3), David recounts a past deliverance: he waited for the LORD, was lifted from a pit of miry clay, had his feet set on a rock, and was given a new song — and the effect was that many would see and fear and trust. In the second movement (vv. 4–10), David reflects on the nature of trust and obedience: the blessed man is the one whose trust is in the LORD rather than in the proud or those who turn to lies; the LORD’s wondrous deeds are innumerable; sacrifice and offering are not what the LORD desires — rather, it is a heart that delights to do His will, with God’s law written within. David then declares his public proclamation of righteousness and salvation in the great congregation. In the third movement (vv. 11–17), the psalm pivots sharply from thanksgiving to urgent petition: David is surrounded by evils without number, his iniquities have overtaken him, and he cries for deliverance. The psalm closes with confidence that those who seek the LORD will rejoice, and that the LORD thinks of David even in his affliction.

This Text — Intent:

God is seeking to reorient His people away from a transactional, performance-based relationship with Him — defined by sacrifices and external religious acts — and toward a posture of radical trust and interior obedience that has seen His saving acts, proclaimed them publicly, and holds that testimony precisely when new affliction arrives. The intent is not merely to inform Israel of David’s experience but to form in the reader the same posture: wait actively, witness publicly, trust interiorly, and cry honestly when overwhelmed — all as the fitting response to a God whose wondrous deeds are beyond counting. The psalm refuses to end in triumph, which is itself a pastoral intention: the life of faith includes the cry of vv. 12–17 as much as the song of vv. 1–3.

Subject Sentence: The God who lifts from the pit calls His people to interior obedience and honest petition.

Primary Claim: God is calling His redeemed people to respond to His salvation not with ritual performance but with a listening heart, public witness, and urgent honest prayer — demonstrating that trust in the LORD is not invalidated but expressed through ongoing need and cry.

Interpretive Evaluation

The heart-obedience passage (vv. 5–8) and its New Testament appropriation: The most significant interpretive issue in Psalm 40 is the relationship between vv. 6–8 (“Sacrifice and offering you did not desire... I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart”) and Hebrews 10:5–10, where the author of Hebrews places these words in the mouth of the incarnate Christ. Several readings arise.

A purely typological reading treats vv. 6–8 as exclusively Messianic — that David is speaking prophetically of Christ, and the primary referent is the obedient Son who comes to do the Father’s will. Hebrews does use this text precisely this way, and that use is not merely illustrative — the author treats it as fulfilled speech. However, a Reformed reading will hold both registers simultaneously: the words are genuinely David’s expression of his own posture of obedient trust (the meaning in original context), and they are simultaneously and more fully realized in Christ’s obedience. Hebrews reveals the ultimate intention latent in the text without evacuating the Davidic referent. To preach this psalm as *only* Messianic collapses the psalm’s own pastoral movement; to preach it with no Messianic consciousness ignores canonical revelation. The Reformed verdict: David speaks truly of himself; Christ speaks most truly of Himself; and both are in the text.

“Ears you have dug/opened for me” (v. 6): The Septuagint renders the Hebrew *oznayim karitha-li* (literally, “ears you have dug for me”) as “a body you have prepared for me” — which is the form Hebrews 10 quotes. Some treat this as a translation error; others see the LXX as a legitimate interpretive expansion (the ear opened to hear = the body prepared to obey). The Reformed reading acknowledges the textual complexity without distress: the Septuagint rendering, appropriated by the inspired author of Hebrews under divine guidance, is authoritative for its Christological application. The Hebrew text in its own context speaks of the LORD opening David’s ear to hear and therefore obey — a Semitic idiom for a servant made receptive to the master’s instruction. Both senses are theologically congruent.

The co-presence of thanksgiving and lament (the psalm’s structure): Wesleyan and Charismatic readings tend to separate the psalm’s movements — treating vv. 1–10 as the properly spiritual state and vv. 11–17 as a failure or a second, less mature prayer. This misreads the psalm’s canonical function. The lament is not a relapse — it is an expression of the same trust. The Reformed reading insists on holding the whole psalm together: the God who lifted David from the pit in vv. 1–3 is precisely the God David calls upon in vv. 12–17. The new song of vv. 3 does not preclude the cry of v. 17. This is pastorally critical and must not be smoothed over.

The moralistic reading of vv. 4–8: A common evangelical misreading treats vv. 4–8 as instruction in spiritual disciplines — trust God more, read your Bible, don’t rely on sacrifices. This reduces the passage to imperative without locating the motivation in God’s prior saving acts (vv. 1–3). The Reformed reading insists: the call to interior obedience

flows from prior grace, not toward earned standing. David’s delight in the law (v. 8) is the response of the delivered man, not the strategy of the man seeking deliverance.

Key Canonical Support

- **Hebrews 10:5–10** — The inspired New Testament appropriation of vv. 6–8, placing David’s words in the mouth of the incarnate Christ, showing that Christ’s perfect obedience fulfills what David articulated and what no Old Testament sacrifice could accomplish — the deepest grounding of the psalm’s anti-ritualism.
- **1 Samuel 15:22** — “To obey is better than sacrifice” — Samuel’s rebuke of Saul establishes that the priority of interior obedience over external ritual is not Davidic innovation but rooted in the prophetic witness; Psalm 40 gives this principle its fullest poetic expression.
- **Psalms 22** — The structural parallel: a psalm that moves from desolation to trust, from “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” to public proclamation in the great congregation — the same movement of lament, trust, and witness that governs Psalm 40; both psalms are also applied Christologically in the New Testament.
- **Romans 12:1–2** — Paul’s appeal to present bodies as living sacrifices, reasonable worship, as the New Testament expression of the same move Psalm 40 makes: the replacement of external ritual with whole-person surrender as the fitting response to God’s mercies.
- **Jeremiah 31:33** — The new covenant promise: “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts” — the eschatological realization of what Psalm 40:8 describes as David’s posture; the heart that delights in God’s law is ultimately a new-covenant gift, pointing toward its fulfillment in Christ and in His Spirit-indwelt people.

Aim: To move the reader from a performance-based engagement with God toward a posture of trusting memory, public witness, and honest cry — demonstrating that the whole Psalm 40 movement (deliverance → proclamation → petition) is the shape of faithful covenant life.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1	David waited patiently for	Hebrew: <i>qawwoh qiwwiti</i> —

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	the LORD; the LORD inclined and heard his cry	intensified form, “I waited and waited”; active, expectant waiting
2	Lifted from the pit of destruction, the miry bog; feet set on a rock, steps made secure	Vivid imagery of helplessness → stability; the pit may be metaphorical (distress) or near-literal
3	A new song put in David’s mouth; many will see, fear, and trust in the LORD	The deliverance issues in public witness; the effect on observers is explicit
4	Blessed is the man who makes the LORD his trust, not the proud or those who turn to false gods	Wisdom-form beatitude; “the proud” and “those who turn to lies” are defined alternatives to LORD-trust
5	The LORD’s wondrous deeds and thoughts toward us are more than can be told	The innumerability of God’s acts grounds the call to trust; this is not a duty but a response to abundance
6	Sacrifice and offering not desired; burnt offering and sin offering not required; but ears opened	The four-fold sacrificial list is comprehensive; the opened ear = receptivity to obedience; cf. LXX/Hebrews 10
7	“Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come; in the scroll of the book it is written of me’”	David’s submission to covenantal vocation; Hebrews 10 reads this as Christological self-presentation
8	“I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart”	Interior obedience from delight, not duty; the law is written inward — anticipates Jer. 31
9	I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation; I have not restrained my lips	Public proclamation is the fitting response to God’s saving acts; witness is not optional
10	Righteousness, faithfulness, salvation, steadfast love, and faithfulness declared openly	Five divine attributes proclaimed; the congregation is the context for covenant witness

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
11	Appeal: do not withhold compassion, steadfast love, and faithfulness from me	The pivot — petition now mirrors the proclamation of v. 10; David asks God to be what he just declared
12	Evils without number surround him; iniquities overtake him; heart fails	Sharp pastoral realism; both external enemies and personal sin are in view simultaneously
13	“Be pleased, O LORD, to deliver me! O LORD, make haste to help me!”	Urgent, direct petition; nearly verbatim Psalm 70:1 — this psalm is the source text
14–15	Petition for shame and confusion upon those who seek David’s life, who delight in his hurt	Imprecatory element; not personal vengeance but appeal to God’s covenant justice
16	All who seek the LORD rejoice and are glad; those who love salvation say continually, “Great is the LORD!”	The community of faith is distinct from David’s enemies; their joy is covenantal, ongoing
17	“As for me, I am poor and needy, but the Lord takes thought for me; you are my help and my deliverer; do not delay, O my God”	Climactic confession of dependence; “poor and needy” is not spiritual metaphor but honest self-assessment; confidence in God’s care despite felt need

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–3	The Testimony: Waiting, Lifting, and the New Song
2	4–5	The Beatitude: Trust Defined Against Its Alternatives
3	6–10	The Obedience: Heart-Surrender and Public Proclamation
4	11–12	The Turn: Petition Arising

Division	Verses	Label
5	13–17	from New Affliction The Cry: Urgent, Honest, and Grounded in Covenant Confidence

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The God who lifts from the pit calls His people to interior obedience and honest petition.

Primary Claim: God is calling His redeemed people to respond to His salvation not with ritual performance but with a listening heart, public witness, and urgent honest prayer — demonstrating that trust in the LORD is not invalidated but expressed through ongoing need and cry.

Applications (Five)

1. (Mind/Belief) — Reframe what God actually wants from you. The natural assumption of the religious heart — that what God requires is correct external performance: attendance, giving, religious activity — is precisely what this psalm dismantles. David declares that God does not desire sacrifice and offering; He desires an opened ear and an inward law. Examine what you are bringing to God. If your religious activity is largely external compliance with no corresponding interior surrender and delight, you are not yet at the center of what Psalm 40 commends. God is not impressed with what you do for Him in public if your ear is closed to what He says in private. The question this passage presses on you is not “Am I doing enough?” but “Is my heart listening?”

2. (Affections/Worship) — Let the memory of past deliverance reshape how you feel about your current circumstances. David does not begin with his present crisis — he begins with a remembered pit and a remembered lifting. This sequencing is not accidental: it is pastoral. The new song (v. 3) is not decoration; it is the emotional resource that makes the cry of v. 17 possible without despair. If you are in a pit right now, the question Psalm 40 puts to you is: *Have you told the story of the last time God lifted you?* The affection the psalm is trying to produce is not forced optimism but grounded hope — the kind that comes from a specific memory of specific grace, rehearsed until it becomes the emotional baseline from which present petition is made.

3. (Will/Behavior) — Declare publicly what God has done for you, in the congregation and beyond it. David does not merely feel grateful — he tells it. Verses 9–10 enumerate five times that he has opened his mouth in the assembly to proclaim God’s righteousness, faithfulness, salvation, steadfast love, and truth. Public witness is presented not as an

optional spiritual add-on for extroverts but as the natural and necessary overflow of genuine deliverance. The application is specific: identify one person this week — in your family, your small group, your workplace — to whom you will tell what God has done for you. Not a theological proposition. A specific story of specific grace. This is what David did, and it is what the psalm calls its readers to do.

4. (Affections/Worship) — Bring God the full and unfiltered weight of your need, rather than the sanitized version. The pivot in v. 12 is abrupt and unapologetic: “evils without number have surrounded me; my iniquities have overtaken me.” David does not explain away his distress or qualify it into spiritual-sounding language. He brings both external attack and internal guilt to God in the same breath. Many believers pray the first half of Psalm 40 (the grateful thanksgiving section) but refuse the second half — they will not bring God the full weight of their need, their sin, their fear, or their urgency. This psalm commends the whole cry. God is not honored by the half-prayer that leaves out what you are actually afraid of. Bring it all. “Poor and needy” (v. 17) is not a failure state — it is the honest posture that the LORD takes thought for.

5. (Will/Behavior) — Stop substituting religious activity for the interior surrender the LORD is actually seeking. The four-fold sacrificial list in v. 6 — sacrifice, offering, burnt offering, sin offering — covers the entire spectrum of Old Testament religious practice. God says He has not desired these. The application is not that religious practice is worthless, but that religious practice unaccompanied by interior obedience and covenant trust has missed the point entirely. In your own life, identify one area where you are doing the religious thing — showing up, giving, performing — while simultaneously withholding the interior surrender that would actually cost you something. The psalm is not asking you to do more; it is asking you to let God have what He actually wants: your listening ear, your delight in His will, your heart.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Psalm 40 makes an extraordinary claim about what God desires from His people: not the external machinery of religious observance, however carefully calibrated, but interior obedience arising from a heart that has heard and been shaped by the word of God. This is not a new covenant innovation imposed backward onto an Old Testament text — it is the Old Testament itself declaring that the sacrificial system was never the point; it was always a sign pointing to the heart posture it was meant to express. The passage also teaches that God’s wondrous deeds toward His people are not occasional and individual but innumerable and cosmic — “more than can be told” (v. 5) — which means the foundation for trust is always vastly larger than the presenting crisis. Finally, the psalm teaches that divine compassion, steadfast love, and faithfulness (v. 11) are not qualities God displays only when His people are performing well; they are what His people appeal to precisely when they are not.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Psalm 40 is a pre-Christological statement of the doctrine of justification by grace through faith, expressed from within the covenant community's life of worship. The rejection of sacrifice as God's ultimate desire (v. 6) does not mean sacrifice is useless — it means sacrifice without interior faith and obedience is empty; and that the entire sacrificial economy pointed forward to the One who would come and say, "Behold, I have come to do your will" (Heb. 10:7). Reformed theology's insistence that Old and New Testament believers are saved by the same grace, through the same faith, in the same Christ — albeit with different degrees of revelatory clarity — finds a striking confirmation here: David's delight in God's law (v. 8) is not moral achievement but covenant response, the same structure as Pauline grace-grounded obedience. Furthermore, the psalm's refusal to end in triumph but in honest, needy petition (vv. 12–17) is a profound pastoral witness against any doctrine of perfectionism or triumphalism: the redeemed believer is simultaneously the one with the new song and the one crying "make haste to help me." Reformed anthropology makes room for this — the *simul justus et peccator* is not contradiction but the contour of the whole Christian life.

Main Takeaway

The God who pulled you out of the pit last time is not asking you to perform your way to His favor — He is asking you to listen, obey from delight, tell the story to others, and then bring Him every desperate prayer the next crisis produces. The shape of faithful covenant life is not gratitude followed by steady spiritual health; it is gratitude, witness, and honest cry — on repeat, for as long as you live. The LORD takes thought for the poor and needy. Come as you are. Come with all of it.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Preaching only the first half and calling it a victory lap.** Verses 1–10 can be preached in isolation as a triumphant testimony psalm, and the congregation will feel good — but the preacher will have severed the psalm at its pastoral center. The abrupt turn in vv. 11–17 is not an embarrassing appendix; it is the point. A God who is praised in vv. 1–10 must also be the God cried out to in vv. 12–17 — or the praise is decorative rather than covenantally real. Preach the whole arc.
- **Treating vv. 6–8 as exclusively Messianic and losing the Davidic referent.** Hebrews 10 applies these verses to Christ, and that application is inspired and authoritative. But if the preacher treats the entire passage as a Christological prophecy with no purchase in David's actual experience, the psalm's pastoral function — calling the reader to the same interior obedience David describes — is lost. Both registers must be held: David means it of himself; Christ fulfills it

perfectly; the reader is called to the same posture, enabled by the Spirit of the One who fulfilled it.

- **Moralizing the heart-obedience section.** Verses 6–10 can be reduced to a five-point program: (1) prioritize obedience over ritual, (2) delight in God’s word, (3) tell others about God. This is not wrong, but it bypasses the motivational grounding: David’s delight flows from his memory of the pit and the rock (vv. 1–2). Application of vv. 6–10 must be tethered to the prior grace of vv. 1–3, or it becomes law without gospel.
- **Spiritualizing “poor and needy” in v. 17 into a generic humility posture.** The phrase carries genuine weight: David is not merely performing spiritual humility — he is describing a real condition of helplessness, surrounded by enemies, overtaken by sin. The pastoral power of the verse is precisely its honesty. Preaching that sanitizes “poor and needy” into a spiritual virtue loses the raw pastoral permission the verse grants: you may come to God in genuine need, not with performed weakness.
- **Missing the public witness motif in vv. 9–10.** The five-fold declaration of God’s attributes in the great congregation is not a rhetorical flourish — it is presented as the proper sequel to private deliverance. Preaching that treats faith as entirely private and personal will find this passage uncomfortable, and that discomfort is itself the sermon. The believer who has been lifted from the pit is expected to say so, publicly, in the assembly of God’s people.
- **Ignoring the LXX/Hebrews textual issue in v. 6.** Some preachers avoid it because it is complicated; others overexplain it to the point of losing the congregation. The right path is to acknowledge the difference briefly, explain that the Hebrews quotation is inspired and authoritative for its New Testament application, and then return quickly to the pastoral and Christological substance: whether “opened ears” or “prepared body,” the meaning is the same — the Son came to do what no sacrifice could do, and David’s psalm anticipated Him.