

The Third Act

Isaiah 49:1-7 | Psalm 40:1-12 | 1 Corinthians 1:1-9 | John 1:29-42

PSALM 40:1-12

¹ I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard my cry. ² He brought me out of the roaring pit, out of the mire and clay; he set my feet upon a rock and made my footing sure. ³ He has put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God; many shall see and fear and put their trust in the Lord. ⁴ Blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, who does not turn to the proud that follow a lie. ⁵ Great are the wonders you have done, O Lord my God. How great your designs for us! There is none that can be compared with you. ⁶ If I were to proclaim them and tell of them, they would be more than I am able to express. ⁷ Sacrifice and offering you do not desire but my ears you have opened; ⁸ Burnt offering and sacrifice for sin you have not required; then said I: 'Lo, I come. ⁹ 'In the scroll of the book it is written of me that I should do your will, O my God; I delight to do it: your law is within my heart.' ¹⁰ I have declared your righteousness in the great congregation; behold, I did not restrain my lips, and that, O Lord, you know. ¹¹ Your righteousness I have not hidden in my heart; I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation; I have not concealed your loving-kindness and truth from the great congregation. ¹² Do not withhold your compassion from me, O Lord; let your love and your faithfulness always preserve me.

INTRODUCTION

Last September, after a sermon, I learned that my taste in mafia movies is apparently controversial. That perception will probably not change today—and I'm okay with that. I love mafia movies because they are about faith, family, and the like. It's a kind of perfect analogy for church—minus the violence... usually. Well, my favourite mafia movie, taking it as a whole, is the Godfather trilogy, including and especially the third film. Critics and audiences alike widely hated it. But they're wrong. It's the necessary third act. The first one is about what a man will do to protect his family. The second is about the origin of their organized crime, and how easy it is to slip into total depravity, including fratricide. Well, the third movie is about redemption. It completes the story. In the first part of the movie, Michael Corleone, the head of the mafia family, begins to try to separate himself from their criminal activities—even working with the Vatican Bank to try to legitimize his business, freeing his son from occupational expectations, and setting up a charity for his daughter to manage. And if they had left it there, it would have been a great story of redemption, and a remarkably short movie. But then there is a rather dramatic assassination attempt: helicopters and machine guns. And we get the famous line: "Just when I thought I was out, they pull me back in!"¹ The rest of the movie is Michael's struggle for redemption. He tries to do the right thing. There is an especially powerful scene where he makes his confession to a Cardinal, his first confession in 30 years, admitting his many sins, and later repents: "Give me a chance to redeem myself, and I will sin, no more."² Confession, by the way, is something you might hear me talk more about as we make our way toward Lent. In any case, it is a powerful story—rescued from death, a vow to live in righteousness, a public declaration—a recognition of the change in his heart.

Like the Psalm before us this morning, I think this movie is a picture of the gospel—it bears the shape the of the gospel. Rescue. Response. Recounting. Reliance. And we learn this from the

¹ Mario Puzo, Francis Ford Coppola, "The Godfather, Part III."

² Mario Puzo, Francis Ford Coppola, "The Godfather, Part III."

Psalm: We will never not need the rescue of the Lord. “Just when I thought I was out, they pull me back in?” We will never not need the rescue of the Lord. Let’s take a closer look.

1. RESCUE (VV. 1-6)

The first stanza, the first six verses, describes the rescue of the Psalmist.³ It begins with a redundant phrase translated as ‘waiting patiently,’ but literally meaning ‘looking, I looked for the Lord.’ For the one being rescued, there is little to do but look for the Lord to bring salvation. Rescue will not be initiated by the Psalmist, but by Yahweh. The rest of the stanza, then, focuses on what the Lord does in rescuing. He bends down. He listens. And then he brings up from the roaring pit, the miry bog—both metaphors for death and hell. And then he sets the Psalmist’s feet on the rock—an image of bringing him stability. This is a total rescue. This is a life and death rescue. This is not salvation from a boring conversation or an annoying traffic jam, but from the sort of circumstances in life that produce real anxiety, real fear, real dread—those moments when you feel true shame or distress, not sure what to do, but certain that something must give, that things cannot continue this way. We all have these moments in life, occasionally—those turning points. And in one of those moments, the Psalmist tells us, the Lord rescued him. And not just rescued, but the Lord gave him a song to sing of being rescued (foreshadowing the next two stanzas). But now, taking a step back, the Psalmist notes what a blessed thing it is to rely upon the Lord who rescues. “*Great are the wonders you have done, O Lord my God.*” The first stanza clearly marks out this Psalm as a psalm of praise and thanksgiving to the Lord, for the Psalmist has been rescued. But it does not stop there. The Psalmist then indicates his response.

2. RESPONSE (VV. 7-9)

In verses seven to nine, the Psalmist lays out two options for a response to having been rescued. Four types of sacrifice are noted, corresponding to the different major offerings outlined in Leviticus 1-4. But the Psalmist notes that it is not sacrifices in gratitude to being rescued that are required. It’s not empty religious rites that the Lord desires. But obedience. “*In the scroll of the book it is written of me that I should do your will, O my God; I delight to do it: your law is within my heart.*”⁴ This is a common theme noted elsewhere in the Old Testament.⁵ The Lord is far less interested in mere religious ceremonies than he is in the heart of his people. It’s not that rituals are wholly bad, but devoid of a sincere heart, they are counterproductive. Real repentance is what is desired, real obedience and commitment to live according to the Lord’s way. He did not save his people so that they could feign religious devotion and live how they want. Not at all. He saved his people so that they would come to worship him through living the way he sets out in his Word. What does ritual matter if our hearts are far from the Lord?

Now of course, this should sound challenging. It should sound impossible. It is. Even in gratitude, obeying perfectly is beyond our grasp. This is the very point the author of the Letter to the Hebrews is making when he quotes these verses.⁶ Only there, he says it is Jesus, and not

³ At this point, it is worth noting that the Coverdale Psalter in use in the Church of England’s liturgical resources numbers the verse of the Psalm quite differently than the major translations (NRSV, NIV, KJV). The Coverdale Psalter splits verse 5 in the NRSV, for example, rendering the number of the verses off by 1 through verse 17. It likewise splits the final verse, such that the Coverdale version of Psalm 40 is 19 verses, whereas the major translations typically have 17 verses.

⁴ Psa 40:9.

⁵ See, for example, 1 Sam 15:22-23.

⁶ Heb 10:5-7.

the Psalmist, who sets aside sacrifices in order to vow obedience. And Jesus did it, he made that vow and then lived a life of perfect obedience. And because he did, not because we will (remember, we cannot), because he did, we can obey through faith in him. Because he became the sacrifice, sacrifice is no longer needed. Because he obeyed, we can. The author of Hebrews concludes it this way: *“And it is by God’s will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.”*⁷ His death and resurrection bring us rescue and forms our response.

3. RECOUNTING (VV. 10-11)

But interestingly, the response does not stop with obedience. It also includes recounting the salvation, the rescue of the Lord. The next stanza, verses ten and eleven, show as much. *“I have declared your righteousness in the great congregation; behold, I did not restrain my lips, and that, O Lord, you know. Your righteousness I have not hidden in my heart; I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation; I have not concealed your loving-kindness and truth from the great congregation.”*⁸ It makes sense. Having been rescued from the pit of hell, and having dedicated his life to the Lord, the Psalmist cannot but help and tell the world. In the New Testament, this is called evangelism. And perhaps it is something we might consider. Has the Lord rescued us? Have we really come to terms with our need of his rescue, our sin that separates us from him, his marvellous grace in saving us, and our desire, then, to live according to his ways? If so, why wouldn’t we want to share it? What should keep us from letting everyone know that the Lord is good and rescues his people and, as such, is worthy of our praise? How fortunate we are, to be shown this mercy! How can we stay quiet?

4. RELIANCE (V. 12)

But, then, we get to that last line. This Psalm of thanksgiving and praise for the Lord’s rescue and the two-fold response of the Psalmist takes a turn. *“Do not withhold your compassion from me, O Lord; let your love and your faithfulness always preserve me.”*⁹ Rescue is met with a response of obedience and recounting of the Lord’s salvation. But then, in that line, there is a return. This line seems out of place in a Psalm of thanksgiving and, yet, not surprising at all. Even we who have been rescued by the Lord from sin and death, who have been given the assurance of salvation through faith, we know that is not the end of the story in this life. We know that the need to be rescued, the presence of anxiety and frustration and sadness, caused by our own sin, returns. It always returns. And the Psalm becomes a psalm of lament, of pleading, desperation for the Lord who rescues to continue extending his hand of mercy. We will never not need the rescue of the Lord.

And this is where we find ourselves. For those who do not yet believe, that first stanza is for you. The Lord brings rescue. Believe and repent. For those who do believe, we are the chosen people of God, rescued by him through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, called to obedience and to sharing that good news. But it does not mean life is easy or that sin is no longer present in our lives. We continue to need his mercy, his compassion, his ongoing rescue. *“Just when I thought I was out, they pull me back in?”* The world has a way of pulling us back in to the mess, into the miry bog, into the hell we create for ourselves through our sin. But our Lord

⁷ Heb 10:10.

⁸ Psa 40:10-11.

⁹ Psa 40:12.

continues to rescue, to preserve. On that we can rely. Even when stress is at its peak, the consequences are at their worst, our loved ones have turned blind eyes, and we feel most alone. The Lord rescues, so that we may respond and recount his infinite mercy. The cycle continues, but our reliance must be on the Lord.

CONCLUSION

And today, my friends, I hope it is for you. I hope your reliance is on the Lord, on his rescue, for we will never not need the rescue of the Lord. He is the only one who can pull us up from the pit, out of the miry bog. He is the only one who can redeem the mafia bosses and the only one who can redeem even us. May we sing, as we have many times during this season of Epiphany, may we sing of seeking his truth and love:

Fear not to enter his courts in the slenderness
of the poor wealth thou wouldst reckon as thine:
truth in its beauty, and love in its tenderness,
these are the offerings to lay on his shrine.¹⁰

Let me pray: *Heavenly Father, thank you for rescuing us through the sacrifice of your Son. May we live according to your abundant mercy, and your glory proclaim. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

¹⁰ John S.B. Monsell, "O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness!" (1863).