

# Adult Teaching Resources

March 25, 2018



## Lent: Keeping Faith (February 18-March 25)

Exodus 20:1-17 – “A Covenant Nation”

Numbers 21:4-9 – “Covenant Breaking”

Psalm 51 (RCL 51:1-12) – “Covenant Renewal”

**Psalm 40:1-17 (RCL 40:5-10) – “Covenant Celebration”**

[www.nurturingfaith.net](http://www.nurturingfaith.net)

Subscribe to *Nurturing Faith* to access the core Bible content for this lesson. Find links and videos related to this lesson.

# Covenant Celebration

*Psalm 40:1-17*

## FIT Teaching Guide

by David Woody

This adult teaching outline is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartlege, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

## Bible Background

---

*“You have multiplied, O LORD my God,  
your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward us;  
none can compare with you.  
Were I to proclaim and tell of them,  
they would be more than can be counted.”*      *Psalm 40:5*

There is a cartoon that depicts success in graph form. The first panel of the cartoon is labeled, “The Perception of Success.” The graph line starts in the bottom left corner and is a straight line angling upward and forward. It is neat. It is predictable. It is pretty.

The second panel of the cartoon is labeled, “The Reality of Success.” The graph line starts in the bottom left corner and then jumps, squiggles, goes up, moves back down, goes forward, slants backwards, and even forms a messy single-line ball. It is chaotic. It is unpredictable. It is messy.

That’s the way life is. We want it to be a straight, neat line. But life is messy; full of ups and downs, highs and lows, mountaintops and valleys. Today’s psalm is a beautiful expression of what we experience and the God who is with us on the journey.

## Opening

---

Everyone has high moments and low moments. After everyone has arrived, move to the board and divide the board in two sections. On one side, label it “Mountaintops.” On the other side, label it “Valleys.”

Ask everyone to think about the mountaintop and valley experiences in their lives. Have folks share both. They don’t have to go into great detail if they don’t want. Simply naming the event is enough.

After both sides of the board are sufficiently full, ask some questions like these for conversation:

How did you feel during the mountaintop experiences?

How did you feel during the valley experiences?

Did you see God on the mountaintop? Where?

## Opening *continued*

Did you see God in the valley? Where?

What have you learned about life from those experiences?

## Reading the Bible

---

What did the psalmist do according to the beginning of the psalm? (waited patiently for the Lord) How does the psalmist describe what God did for him? (he drew me up from the desolate pit, set me feet on a rock)

According to the psalmist, who are the “happy?” (those who trust in the Lord, those who don’t turn to the proud, or those who chase after false gods)

How did God relate to God’s people? (focused deeds and thoughts toward them) How does the psalmist describe those thoughts and deeds? (they are more than can be counted)

What does God want with sacrifice and offerings? (God does not desire them, they aren’t required)

What is the psalmist’s confession? (vv 7-10)

What does the psalmist desire from God? (for God to not withhold mercy from him, for God’s love and faithfulness to keep him safe forever)

What bad fortune had befallen the psalmist? (evils have encompassed him, iniquities have overtaken him)

How does the psalmist ask for God’s help? (deliver me, make haste to help me) What is his hope for those who oppress him? (let them be put to shame and confusion, let them be turned back and brought to dishonor, let them be appalled of their shame)

How does our psalmist display humility in relationship to God? (may all who seek you rejoice, may those who love salvation say “Great is the Lord,” I am poor and needy, the Lord takes thought of me, you are my help and deliverer)

## Making Connections

---

Share time when you have found yourself in a “desolate pit” or a “miry bog.” What got you there? What did you need to get out? Did you ask for help? Who did you ask? How did you ask? What ultimately happened?

Share a time when God has pulled you out of the muck. What was the situation? When did it happen? What did God do for you? How did you know it was God?

What does it mean to trust someone? Who do you trust? Why do you trust them? How much do you trust God? How do you know you are living into that trust?

## Making Connections *continued*

Which would you rather do to remain in good favor with God:

- a. animal sacrifices or some kind of offering that is truly a sacrificial offering for you?
- b. committing yourself to unwavering obedience to God?

Why did you choose what you did?

If you were going to write a book of your life for God to read, what would you include?

How often do you share with others what God has done or is doing in your life? Who do you share this testimony with? How is your testimony received?

When have you felt blinded by troubles, temptations, or failure, finding it hard to see any way forward? How have you been able to find God in those moments?

What is your prayer to God for your deliverance and stability that would allow you to continually proclaim God's greatness?

## So What? \_\_\_\_\_

Our Lesson Writer says, "Sometimes we, like the psalmist, may connect personal or relational troubles to our spiritual state, thinking God has left us to experience the natural result of our sins."

As a group, talk about that statement in light of life being full of ups and downs.

What do you think about that statement?

What do you think is the natural result of our sins?

How does sin and reflecting on your sinfulness affect you and your relationships with others?

How does sin and God's forgiveness affect you and your relationship with God and with others?

How does this psalm and our conversation inform your entrance into Holy Week?

## The Challenge \_\_\_\_\_

This week is Holy Week. The challenge is to participate in Holy Week worship somewhere in your community. If your church doesn't have a Maundy Thursday service, find one in your community and experience it. If your church doesn't have a Good Friday worship, find a church in town that does.

Holy Week is about more than the resurrection. A lot happens on the way to the empty tomb. It is important for us to live the highs and lows of this week with Jesus and with other faithful followers.

## Prayer

---

*Loving God, you are wonderful and glorious and worthy of our praise and worship. Thank you for the high points in life we celebrate. And, while we might not want to thank you for the valleys and low points we experience, we give you thanks for what we learn and for being with us along the way. Walk with us this Holy Week. Amen.*

## Digging Deeper

by Tony Cartlege

Digging Deeper is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartlege, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. Watch for the “shovel” icon in the THE BIBLE LESSON, and then reference that item in this Digging Deeper resource. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

**The text**—The Revised Lectionary reading from the Psalms includes only vv. 5-10, probably because we are approaching Passion week and vv. 6-8 were attributed to Jesus by the author of Hebrews. As usual, we will broaden our study to give proper attention to the context, and consider the entire psalm.

Some have regarded Psalm 40 as two psalms that have been combined, in part because vv. 1-10 and 11-17 shift from praise to lament, and partly because vv. 13-17 also appear, separately, as Psalm 70. The combination of praise and lament is not unusual in the psalms, however: whatever their roots, these verses have been put in their present form for a purpose.

Both Psalm 40 and 70 have superscriptions attributing them to David. As we have often noted, the superscriptions were later editorial additions designed to suggest a possible situation in life for the psalm. There is no other evidence that David was the author. Indeed, many scholars consider the psalm to be from the postexilic period.

**Stuck in the mud?**—The word for “pit” in v. 2 was used to describe deep cisterns commonly dug to collect rainwater in dry lands. The modifier translated as “desolate” actually refers to a great din or crashing sound, however, such as the sea makes. The psalmist probably intends the reader to think of the pit of Sheol, sometimes described as beneath the sea.

“Miry bog” translates two words that both refer to mud, like “muddy muck,” conjuring an image of someone stuck in quicksand, sinking and in danger of death.

**Waiting patiently?**—The NRSV’s translation “I waited patiently for the LORD” could be misleading. He speaks of being stuck in a slippery pit, in muddy muck that calls to mind quicksand. Though clearly metaphorical, it suggests a situation of some desperation in which quiet patience would be hard to come by.

A closer look at the Hebrew suggests an alternative: the writer used a special construction in which two forms of the same verb (an infinitive absolute plus an active form) are combined for the purpose of emphasis. Literally, we could read “Waiting, I waited,” or “I *really* waited.” The construction emphasizes not patience, but the tension involved in a time of desperate waiting – perhaps even *impatience*.

**Sacrifice or obedience?**—The psalmist’s intent in v. 6 is not a polemic against sacrifice, but a reflection of how postexilic psalmists came to think of vocal praise as a preferred alternative to sacrifice.

## Digging Deeper *continued*

Some of the prophets were more forceful in their opinions: Samuel excoriated Saul for feigning sacrificial intentions after disobeying his commands: “Has the LORD as great delight in sacrifices, as in obeying the word of the LORD? Surely to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams” (1 Sam. 15:22, see also Isa. 1:11-17 and Mic. 6:6-8).

**Digging ears?**—The precise meaning of the expression “you have dug out ears for me” is unclear. Some see it as an indication that hearing is a gift of God: God’s creative purpose for humans includes ears. Others imagine the idiom indicates that God has cleaned out the person’s ears so he could hear more clearly. Either could be reflected in the NRSV’s “you have given me an open ear.” Isaiah praised God because

*The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of a teacher,  
that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word.*

*Morning by morning he wakens—wakens my ear  
to listen as those who are taught.*

*The Lord GOD has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious,  
I did not turn backward. (Isa. 50:4-5)*

Still others interpret the digging out of one’s ears to mean that God made something known in an obvious way: the NET has “You make that quite clear to me!”

The early Greek translators appear to have been puzzled by the phrase, coming up with a translation that seems unrelated to the context: the Septuagint (LXX) has “but a body you have prepared for me.” The writer of Hebrews was dependent on this translation when he quoted the verse in Hebrews 10:5 as a prophecy of Christ’s willingness to obey God in giving up his body as a sacrifice.

**Deliverance, or righteousness?**—The word curiously translated by the NRSV as “deliverance” in v. 9 and “saving help” in v. 10 typically refers to righteousness (KJV, NIV 11, HCSB). Perhaps the NRSV translators assumed that God’s righteous justice would inevitably result in deliverance.

**Aha! Aha!**—The Hebrew word translated as “Aha!” would be pronounced something like “he-ah,” with a short “e” as in “heh” – when pronounced in rapid succession, it would sound much like the English way of expressing laughter: “Hah hah hah!”

The word has no other meaning than to express laughter. The term can indicate joy: Isaiah spoke of one who warmed himself by a fire, saying “Aha! I am warm” (Isa. 44:16), but even there Isaiah gives it a negative connotation, for the fire is made from scraps left over from idol carving, which the prophet condemned.

Most commonly, as here, the word is used to indicate the derisive laughter of enemies, as in Ps. 35:21: “They open wide their mouths against me, they say ‘Aha, Aha, our eyes have seen it’ (compare Ps. 35:25, Ezra 25:3, 26:2, 36:2).

## The Hardest Question

by Tony Cartlege

The Hardest Question is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartlege, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

### Does Psalm 40 speak of Jesus?

Psalm 40:6-8 may strike readers as familiar because the author of Hebrews quoted it – from the Greek Septuagint translation – as if Jesus were speaking the words:

*Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said,  
“Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired,  
but a body you have prepared for me;  
in burnt offerings and sin offerings  
you have taken no pleasure.  
Then I said, ‘See, God, I have come to do your will, O God’  
(in the scroll of the book it is written of me).”* (Heb. 10:5-7, NRSV)

The Greek translators apparently took “you have given me an open ear” (literally, “you have dug out ears for me”) as a reference to creation, and rendered the line as “a body you have prepared for me.” That’s quite a translational stretch, but it appealed to the author of Hebrews, who delighted in reading the Old Testament through a Christological lens.

In supporting his argument that Christ’s death on the cross rendered animal sacrifices obsolete, the author seized upon Ps. 40:6-8 as an ideal proof text, imagining that the words had been spoken by the pre-existent Christ, who gave his body as a sacrifice so that “burnt offerings and sin offerings” would no longer be needed.

In typical rabbinic fashion, the author cited the text, then followed it with a *midrash*, or commentary. In vv. 8-10, he argued that Jesus had come as the fulfillment of Ps. 40:6-8. God no longer desired animal sacrifices, for Christ had come to do God’s will by giving his body as a one-time sacrifice. The author concluded: “He abolishes the first in order to establish the second. And it is by God’s will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Heb. 10:9-10).

While the psalmist intended only to declare his belief that God desires obedience more than sacrifice, he could never have imagined that a later writer would interpret his words (including a partial mistranslation) as none other than a declaration of the pre-existent Christ.

For the writer of Hebrews, however, any Old Testament text that appeared to be a foreshadowing of Christ was considered fair game for exposition.