

Legal and Gospel Experience

by Charles Finney

Charles Finney's sermon explores the transition from legal bondage to the freedom found in the Gospel, emphasizing the importance of waiting on the Lord for deliverance and establishing one's faith.

Scripture: Psalm 40:1

Topics: "Deliverance", "Faith and Freedom"

Description

Charles Finney explores the transition from legal bondage to the freedom of the Gospel, using Psalm 40:1-3 to illustrate the journey of a soul trapped in despair and sin, likened to being in a 'horrible pit of miry clay.' He emphasizes the importance of waiting patiently on the Lord, which involves earnest prayer and a deep recognition of one's desperate need for divine intervention. Finney explains that true deliverance comes from God, who lifts the soul from despair and establishes it on a firm foundation, resulting in a transformed life filled with praise and a new song. The sermon serves as a reminder that many believers remain in a state of legal bondage, struggling under guilt, yet they can find hope and freedom through faith in Christ.

Transcript

Text. Ps. 40:1-3.--I waited patiently for the Lord; and he inclined unto me, and heard my cry. He brought me up also out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my goings. And he hath put a new song in my mouth, even praise unto our God: many shall see it, and fear, and shall trust in the Lord.

Many of the Psalms should be regarded as inspired diaries, and as such they are most important way-marks to the Christian. The diaries of other men may mislead us. But when we find our experience to accord with that of inspired men, and with those parts of their experience which were recorded by the Spirit of God, we may be sure that we are in the same path in which they traveled to heaven. The 119 Psalm, together with many others, are manifestly of this character. They are as if the Psalmist had set up way-marks all along the pathway to heaven, and by recording his own experiences as on the mile-stones along the way, had given us the advantage of being certain whether or not we are in the way that inspired men have trodden.

I regard the text as an instance of this kind, wherein the Psalmist, after having passed through severe trials of mind, records both his trials, and deliverance for the benefit of all succeeding ages.

I will discuss this subject in the following order.

I. INQUIRE WHAT WE ARE TO UNDERSTAND BY THE HORRIBLE PIT OF MIRY CLAY.

II. SHOW WHAT IS IMPLIED IN WAITING PATIENTLY FOR THE LORD.

III. SHOW WHAT IS IMPLIED IN BEING BROUGHT UP OUT OF THE HORRIBLE PIT OF MIRY CLAY.

IV. WHAT IS IMPLIED IN HAVING HIS GOINGS ESTABLISHED.

V. NOTICE THE CONSEQUENCES OF THIS EXPERIENCE.

I. What we are to understand by the horrible pit of miry clay.

It should be observed that this is certainly figurative language. It cannot be supposed that the Psalmist had literally fallen into a pit of clay. But he had been in circumstances that might be aptly represented by this analogy. Although language is figurative, it must have a meaning. And generally it is not at all difficult but exceedingly easy to understand figurative language. The figure here used implies,

1. That he had been placed in circumstances of extreme difficulty and danger from which he could not extricate himself.

2. That his efforts to help himself only increased his distress and danger. This is certainly implied in the figure he uses--"a horrible pit of miry clay." Now every one knows, that if a man were thrown into a pit of miry clay, his struggles to extricate himself would only sink him deeper in the mire, and render his circumstances more and more desperate. Whatever else this figure teaches, we must not overlook the fact, that the Psalmist had been placed in circumstances where all his struggles and efforts to extricate himself had but made the matter worse.

3. It implies that his condition was desperate and horrible, like that of a man who wandering in a solitary desert, had fallen into a deep pit of miry clay, beyond the reach and almost beyond the hope or possibility of aid.

Commentators have had numerous conjectures with regard to the Psalmist's meaning in these verses. It were worse than useless to recapitulate them. It is possible that something connected with his worldly circumstances might have been under his eye, when the Psalmist wrote these verses. But to me it appears plain that he designed to describe his own experience, first in a state of legal bondage, and then his passage from that state into the liberty of the Gospel. This language is so perfectly suited to such an experience, that probably no one who has had this experience will doubt that this was his design. This experience is familiar to all those, and only to those, who have passed from legal bondage to the liberty of faith. It appears to me to describe the same experience in a more condensed form as that in the seventh chapter of Romans. The latter part of the seventh contrasted with some of the first verses in the eighth chapter, appear to me to exhibit an experience similar to the one before us.

A selfish soul, whether a backslider or an impenitent sinner, when attempting to serve God is really guilty, and is condemned for every act, and every attempt to serve God, while in a wrong state of heart. The law requires pure and perfect love, and every selfish act and effort is the direct opposite of the requirements of the law. Whether from hope or fear, whether from the lashings of conscience or any other consideration than love, he attempts obedience, he is condemned, and the law utters its thunders, and holds him guilty,

and worthy of eternal death.

Now it often comes to pass that back-sliders and the unconverted, for they are both actuated by the same motives, and are equally under condemnation, it often comes to pass I say, that they have too much conviction to be at all satisfied with anything they do, and yet they are too much distressed to do nothing. They see and feel themselves condemned even for their prayers, and yet they will cry for mercy. They drive in this and that direction, and lay hold on every shrub or bush within their reach to pull themselves out of the pit, and yet their guilt and condemnation is increasing every moment they live. They read, and pray, and go to meeting, and stay at home, and think, and meditate, and seek, and strive, and yet they see and feel themselves condemned for all their striving and efforts, because supreme selfishness is at the bottom of them all. Such a soul finds itself ready to resolve and re-resolve, and heap up resolutions almost without end, but his resolutions are yielding as air before every breath of temptation, because they are made in the face of an antagonist principle. And selfishness is found to sweep away as a dam of sand all those resolutions and efforts, by which an attempt is made to withstand its influence. The truth is that in all such cases, selfishness is at the foundation of all those resolutions and efforts, and while the heart is in this state nothing but a dreadful delusion can keep the mind from seeing that it is in a horrible pit of miry clay--that turn which way it will--that do what it may, while selfishness remains, the guilt is increased by every act, and the soul is sinking more and more deeply under condemnation and wrath at every step. This is truly a desperate situation. To give up effort, the soul in this state will not, and to make such kinds of efforts is worse than useless, in as much as every one of them is sin, and increasing his condemnation. In this state of mind, for an individual to praise the Lord is entirely out of the question.

It appears to me that no figure could more perfectly describe a state of total bondage than this. Convicted of sin, yet having no love to God--influenced by fear and not by faith or love, struggling and agonizing, yet sinking deeper in guilt and condemnation every moment. This is indeed a horrible pit of miry clay.

II. What is implied in waiting patiently for the Lord.

1. Not an indolent sitting still. A man under these circumstances will do any thing but sit still.
2. Not such a waiting as is consistent with leaving the matter and employing the time and thoughts about something else. This certainly will not, cannot be. Nor is any such thing intended in this text.
3. Not a consenting to a postponement of an answer to our requests. A soul in this state is in too much trouble, and feels that it cannot and has no right to be willing to remain for one hour longer in that situation.

I have often thought that the translation of this passage was calculated to make, and had actually made, in many instances, an impression directly contrary to the truth. By waiting patiently many seem to understand a kind of indifference and carelessness about the result. Now the original expresses a state of mind the exact opposite of this, and implies,

(1.) A constant looking to God--waiting on the Lord as a criminal condemned to die would wait anxiously and constantly at the door of one who had the power of pardon.

(2.) An earnest, agonizing, and intense looking or waiting upon the Lord. The translation would exactly have expressed the idea had it said, I waited agonizingly or intensely for the Lord. In the original it reads in waiting I waited, which is one of the forms of expressing a superlative, and implies in this connection a steady yet vehement attitude of supplication.

4. Waiting patiently for the Lord implies a holding on and a refusing to be denied. Like that of Jacob when he said, "I will not let thee go except thou bless me." This state of mind is frequently described in the Bible. In the parable of the loaves, and the importunate widow, the necessity and power of a persevering state of mind are set in a striking light.

5. It implies a sense of being shut up to God for help--a full and ripe conviction of the mind that our circumstances are desperate unless God undertake our case. The Psalmist seems to have waited only upon God.

6. It implies a ripe conviction of the voluntariness of his sin, and consequently the horribleness of his situation. He did not look upon his circumstances as calamitous, and a misfortune but as desperate wickedness. A man never sees the truly horrible nature and desperateness of his circumstances, until he sees that his voluntary selfishness is the only reason why he does not yield full and instantaneous obedience to God. And that this selfishness having grown with his growth, and strengthened with his strength, is sinking him every instant in the horrible pit of miry clay, and despite his resolutions, is sweeping him as with a flood to the depths of hell.

7. It implies so much hope that he should be heard as to encourage prayer. Like a man that had fallen into a pit lifting up his voice again and again, if peradventure some passer-by might hear his wailing and be attracted to the spot to afford him help.

I do not think this waiting upon the Lord implies an anchoring down in faith upon the promises of God, for this would at once remove the anguish of the mind. But it means rather the cry of distress almost despairing, and yet so much hope remaining as to encourage a vehement crying to the Lord.

If it be objected that God answers none but the prayer of faith, it should be remembered that there is a sense in which he hears and answers other prayers than these. He hears the cry of the little ravens, and the young lions when they lack for food. And Christ, when on earth, heard and answered the prayer of devils when they pleaded that they might not be sent out of the country, but might be suffered to go into the herd of swine. God's ear is always open to the cry of distress, and where there is no good reason why he should not, he may and doubtless does often hear, and in some sense answer the prayer of those whose moral character he abhors. I do not believe that God has anywhere laid himself under an obligation to answer any but the prayer of faith. And yet I cannot doubt that he often hears the cry of souls in distress and brings deliverance to those in legal bondage.

III. Show what is implied in being brought up out of the horrible pit.

This is an affecting figure. The language is peculiar. God is here represented as having his attention arrested by some distant cry of distress. A soul has fallen into a horrible pit, and lifts up his voice and cries. "Help! O God, help!" But receiving no answer he cries again. "Help! O my God, help!" Here God's attention is arrested. The cry comes into his ear. He is represented as stooping down--"he inclined unto me." He is represented as inclining in the direction of the cry, and holding himself in the attitude of intense listening. Again the cry breaks upon his ear, "Help! O my God, help!" And then hastening as upon the wings of the wind, he bows the heavens and comes down, and lifts the soul up from the horrible pit of miry clay. This language implies,

1. Deliverance from that state of mind in which all his efforts were selfish and sinful--a breaking up of the influence of self upon the mind, and filling it with love, so as to give it the consciousness that it really

rendered acceptable service to God. While under legal influence, he felt continually that his services were not accepted or acceptable--that they could not and ought not to be accepted by a holy God--that his best services were selfishness and rendered it more and more impossible for God to justify and save him.

2. It implies being placed upon firm footing, where he could serve God with a conscious soundness and firmness of heart--being conscious that he was influenced by love and not by fear, and that his heart was fixed and sincere and full of the love of God. Thus the power of legal considerations over the mind was broken.

3. This expresses the experience of a soul who is led to lay hold on Christ by faith. His feet are set upon the rock Christ. Faith that produces love breaks the yoke of bondage, of selfishness, of death, and admits the soul at once into the rest and liberty of joy, and faith, and love. If any of you have passed through this state of mind, you do not need that I should say any thing to make you understand it; and if you have not, say what I would, you would understand but very little about it.

IV. What is meant by having his goings established.

This is also a figure. He is represented as being set upon a rock, not to slip immediately off, or to be swept off by the first wave of temptation, but as having his footsteps established upon the rock. This implies,

1. That his faith had a permanency and stability that worked by love and prevented his falling again under condemnation. I know that he says in the latter part of this same Psalm, "Mine iniquities have taken hold upon me so that I am not able to look up." But this does not imply that he had really fallen into sin again, but that a sense of his old sin had laid him exceedingly low before God. This is a familiar occurrence to all those whose feet are so established as to abide in the faith of the gospel. They often have so great a sense of their former guilt as to produce the greatest loathing and make them cry out, "Mine iniquities have taken hold upon me so that I am not able to look up." This does not however imply that they have present doubts of their acceptance with God, or feel a sense of present condemnation, or that their hearts are not right with God. It implies rather the contrary state of mind. When their former sin is the object of their thoughts, they are almost overcome with a sense of their exceeding vileness. But as soon as their thoughts return, and God becomes the object of contemplation their hearts are full of love and joy and peace.

2. It implies, that he was so upheld by grace that he found himself able to go forward in the service of God without being brought under the influence of fear and legal motives, and thus again entangled with the clay.

V. The consequences of this experience.

1. A new song was put into his mouth. He could now praise God. I have said that a man under legal influences cannot praise God. The attempt is mockery as every one knows who has been in this state. Praise is therefore a new song to the soul who has passed into gospel liberty.

2. Another consequence of this change was manifest: "Many," he says, "shall see it." Yes the very countenance of such a soul is changed, so that at first flush you would see that he was out of the pit. Instead of that despondency, and anguish, and guilt, which overspread the whole mind there is a sweet calm, a glow, a joy, a peace, a heaven in the very countenance. Everyone can see it.

I once knew an infidel whose only and beloved daughter was in great distress of mind. He observed it and became exceedingly anxious about her, and was proposing to send her out of the city to divert her mind, and restore her former gaiety of disposition. At this crisis he was prevailed upon, by a pious lady in his family, to let his daughter attend an anxious meeting. She came, gave her heart to God and returned in great peace. As soon as her father saw her the next morning, he was struck with the change in her countenance. It was so manifest as almost to overcome him. He said to his wife, that their daughter was greatly altered, and cried out to his daughter with tears, "O you cannot love me anymore if you have given your heart to Christ." I have seen many cases where the change was so great in the very countenance as to tell the whole story more forcibly than any words could do, and it might well be said, "They looked unutterable things."

3. Others "shall fear." When such a great change occurs in any soul, backsliders and impenitent sinners are alarmed. It brings God and eternity near to them. It produces an awe that no preaching could do. It is a matter of fact, a real, living illustration of the power of the gospel and of God. How many times have I known such a change to alarm a whole household, and in some instances a whole neighborhood.

4. It results in their trusting in the Lord. This is a common case. When one passes through this great change, it first alarms, then encourages and brings many to fear and trust in the Lord.

REMARKS.

1. Great multitudes of souls are in the horrible pit of miry clay. From my own observation, I am convinced that the great mass even of those who are called the most pious in the churches, are in a state of legal bondage, and have gone no further in religion than to find themselves in a state of almost continual condemnation. They have conviction enough to make them miserable. They are driven and dragged by their consciences and the law of God--are struggling and resolving, but are under the influence of so much selfishness as to be continually crying out as in the case supposed by the Apostle in the seventh of Romans, "When I would do good, evil is present with me." "I find a law in my members warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity." "O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death?"

2. They seem not to expect to get out of this state. The seventh of Romans has been so perverted as to be a great stumbling block to many souls in this state of mind. They seem to understand the Apostle as speaking of himself as he was at the time he wrote the epistle. And thinking it not to be expected that they should advance further than an inspired Apostle did, they get the idea that they must and shall live and die in that state. I have often thought it was most unhappy that the seventh and eighth chapters were separated. If persons would read attentively the whole of the seventh and eighth chapters in their connexion, they might see the drift of the Apostle's reasoning. I apprehend he merely supposed a case for the purpose of contrasting the influence of the law and of the gospel upon the mind. Now whether this is so or whether he spoke of his own experience, it is certain that the same individual who in the seventh chapter is represented as being under the bondage of law, of sin, and death, is in the beginning of the eighth chapter represented as being brought into an entirely different and opposite state of mind. The same individual who could complain in the seventh chapter as being in such horrible bondage, as being a slave sold under sin, could break forth in the beginning of the eighth chapter and say, "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of

sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh; That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit."

3. They do not take a course that can ever bring them out. They are striving to get grace by works of law, instead of taking hold at once by naked faith upon the promises of God.

4. They form no right conception of the state of mind in which they may be when the power of lust and every temptation shall be broken. They expect therefore to live and die in the pit of their own filthy lusts. And if they do so die, they are sure to go to hell.

5. Many are in the horrible pit, but are fast asleep. They are dreaming that they are awake and they are fancying themselves upon the rock, while they are almost suffocated in the mire of their own filth, and are ready to sink down to hell.

6. Will you consider how much more inexcusable you are for remaining in this pit one moment than the Psalmist was? There are thousands of promises now that had never been written in those days. It is now also the dispensation of the Spirit. You are surrounded with so much more light, have such a full and perfect revelation, and indeed are so circumstanced in every respect as to render you infinitely guilty for remaining there one moment.

7. Those who are delivered will abound in praise. Their hearts and lips are full of praise. It is a new song. Praise is as natural as their breath. That has happened to them which is foretold in the prophet, "He shall appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he might be glorified."

Sometimes I have known those under legal bondage, rebuke those who were full of praise reminding them that they had something else to do--that they had better be praying for sinners than praising and rejoicing. But let all such persons remember that this new song of praise often does more on the one hand to rouse the careless to fear, and on the other to encourage the desponding to hope, than could be effected by any other means.

8. From this subject we can see how it may be known who are delivered--they who have "the new song in their mouth, even praise to our God."

9. You can see the importance and the effect of testifying your joy before the Church and the world. The Psalmist says, "I have not hid thy righteousness within my heart; I have declared thy faithfulness and thy salvation; I have not concealed thy loving-kindness and thy truth from the great congregation."

10. Many may wonder and despise, and perish. Nevertheless let all who have experienced the loving-kindness of the Lord, say with the Psalmist in another place, "Come all ye that fear the Lord, and I will tell you what he has done for my soul."

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