

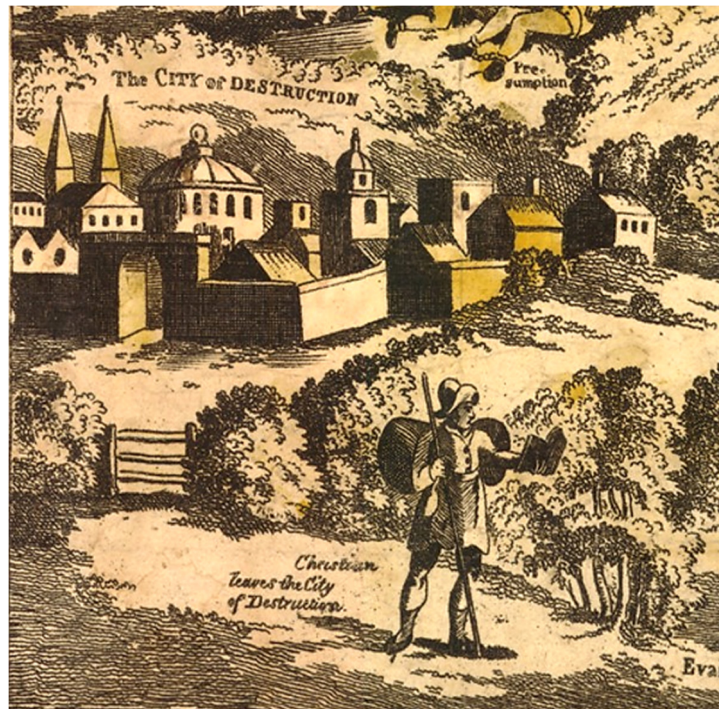
Forging Through the Swamp of Despond

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle

Prayer of Illumination

Lord God, we believe—help our unbelief.
Amen.

Background



Road from the City of Destruction

In a dream, I saw a man named Christian with ragged clothes and a heavy burden on his back. He was preparing to leave his home in the City of Destruction. Nobody from his family and none of his friends were willing to accompany him along his move to an unknown destination. Christian walked alone, wandering the fields, pacing back and forth—uncertain where to go. As he read from his book he cried.

A man named Evangelist approached him, “Why are you crying?” He listened and then directed Christian to follow the light in the distance—it was the light of the Celestial City.



Evangelist shows Christian the way

Following the light would lead him to the wicket gate. From there he would be told what to do next. Others came out to Christian in the fields, pleading for him to come back home.

Only his neighbor Pliable thought it agreeable to join Christian on his journey. The two walked together towards the light.



Pliable

They came upon a very muddy bog in the midst of the plain. Somehow Christian and Pliable failed to see it and fell into it. The name of the miry bog was The Swamp of Despond.



The Swamp of Despond

They flailed and wallowed for a time until they were totally covered with slime and mud. Because of the burden on his back, Christian began to sink deeper and deeper into the muck and the mire. Pliable cried out, "Neighbor Christian, where are you?" Christian whimpered, "To be honest, I've no idea where I am."

Pliable lifted up some of the muck and goo, and then slapped it down in disgust, "is this the happiness you told of about the journey to the Celestial City? What else are we going to encounter before our journey's end? If I can get out alive of this swamp, you're going to have to go on alone along this brave journey of yours. I will be going home."

With that, Pliable struggled back to the side of the swamp that was near his home. Once he got out, he didn't even so as look back to help. Covered in mud, he just walked back home. Christian was left to struggle alone in the Swamp of Despond.

But he didn't give up the struggle. Little by little, inch by inch he made it to the other side of the swamp—away from his home. But because of the great burden on his back, Christian just couldn't quite get out of the swamp by himself.



Help pulling Christian out of the Swamp of Despond

But then in the dream, another character appeared—his name was Help. “What are you doing here?” With a muddy, trembling finger, Christian pointed to the Wicket Gate in the distance. “A man named Evangelist told me to go there to escape the wrath to come. But then I fell in this.” “But why didn’t you look for the steps?” asked Help. “Pliable and I were talking and we never thought to look for stairs.” Help reached out for Christian, “Then give me your hand.” Help pulled Christian out of the Swamp of Despond, “Now Christian, continue on your way.”

In the dream, I approached Help. What is this Swamp of Despond? “It is the fears, doubts, and discouraging apprehensions about oneself that arise in the believer’s soul.”

Let’s hear now the word of the Lord to us from:

Scripture: Psalm 40:1-5 (REB)

Patiently I waited for the Lord; he bent down to me and listened to my cry. He raised me out of the miry pit, out of the mud and clay; he set my feet on rock and gave me a firm footing. On my lips he put a new song, a song of praise to our God. Many will look with awe and put their trust in the Lord. Happy is he who puts his trust in the Lord and does not look to the arrogant or the treacherous. Lord my God, great things you have done; Your wonders and your purposes are for our good; none can compare with you. I would proclaim them and speak of them, but they are more than I can tell.

***The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.***

SERMON – Forging Through the Swamp of Despond

I think we can relate well with Christian right now... bogged down and flailing in the Swamp of Despond. Restrictions and loneliness. Sickness or fears of sickness. Sleepless nights figuring out what to do for school or lining up childcare. Wondering how long this will last. At some point, we all get bogged down in the Swamp of Despond. We need someone to rescue us from the quicksand.

One of my favorite scenes in *The Princess Bride* is when Princess Buttercup has a scary encounter in the Swamp of Fire. But fortunately, there is hope for the damsel in distress.

Enjoy this video clip from: "[The Princess Bride](#)" [stop at 0:53].

King David found himself in a similar situation to Princess Buttercup in our Psalm reading today. God lifted David out of the miry bog in the past and he will rescue him again in a new situation.

What I love about Psalm 40 is that it's real and gritty, both a lament and a thanksgiving to God at the same time. Psalm 40 is a "Before, During, and After" Psalm. David looks back to the past in his life and he remembers God's faithfulness. God snatched him out of some tight spots when for sure he was a goner. Now David cries out in the present to God over new troubles that are drowning him. In the midst of his peril, he has hope for the future that God will deliver him yet again, just like before. Past, present, future, God is there in all the tenses of our lives. Yet the jury is still out at the end of the Psalm. Read Psalm 40. It's a cliff hanger. David is still suffering as he concludes his poem: "I am poor and needy." "My heart fails me." And the last verse: "You are my help and my deliverer. Make haste to help me."

The Psalms are my favorite book of the Bible because they are real. One day we have firm footing; the next day we may be sinking in the pit of despair. Through it all, we trust in God and look to him for rescue.

"I waited patiently before the Lord." When you look at the Hebrew text, the first verse should actually be translated, "I waited and I waited." It's actually an impatient waiting. One translation puts it this way, "I urgently hoped" for the Lord. There's a tension and desperation in the air. David's in a precarious situation, like Christian.

Prayer isn't always a placid or serene time of communion with God. It can also be kind of like Jacob wrestling with the Angel. Like the psalmist, we cry out for divine help, an intervention rather than increased patience. Don't delay God, I'm going down for the count. I've got nothing left. My courage is failing. We don't have to fake how we're really doing with God. And then we hear these beautiful words: "He bent down to me and listened to my cry."

Immanuel, this is the kind of God we have, God with us. God not only takes thought of us. God is not only mindful of us. God listens and hears. He doesn't withhold compassion. God bends down and gets close to help us out and help us up. "He lifted me out of the miry pit, out of the mud and clay and muckiness of life." Literally in Hebrew it's translated the "pit of tumult." God jumps right in with us in that pit of tumult.

Some troubles come against us—blindsiding us. Some others are of our own making. But either way, God doesn't kick us when we're down or give us swimming pointers from the edge of the pool. No,

God dives in head-first after us. He raised me out of the miry pit. And set my feet on rock. Gave me firm footing. Steadied me as I walked along. And he's going to do it again.

We've all had times in our lives, literally or figuratively, where our footing was dicey: a slippery bathtub, an icy sidewalk, or losing our footing on the stairs. God gives us firm footing, steadies us when we've lost our balance or strayed off the straight and narrow path. God does this by making our situation new, or giving us new eyes to see our same situation differently. The impossible is never impossible with God. With faith there is always possibility—even in the eleventh hour, even when we're sinking in the pit of despair.

David tells us in this passage what it's all about: TRUST. "Happy are those who put all their trust in the Lord." Trusting God is putting all our eggs into God's basket. We don't diversify—we're all in. With God and God alone, not with the proud, not with the treacherous, but we look to God for help and hope. God's Word, God himself is ever calling us to TRUST. "Trust me" says the Lord—no matter what. No matter how you're feeling—trust me. No matter what you're going through—trust in me.

Trust is a relationship word. "Happy is the one who makes the Lord his or her trust."

We get some divine help. This isn't about pulling yourself up by your bootstraps, or mere rugged individualism. "God put on my lips a new song of praise to God." This new song is a gift. God wrote it, just for you. We can sing it even when we're bogged down. Thanksgiving isn't just our response to God. God first gives us thanksgiving—then we give it back, no matter our circumstances. It's a miracle. Sometimes this new song breathes new life into an old song we've known a long time. Other times the new song is a deeper understanding, a deeper experience of what you've known before. Sometimes it's an entirely new song that you've never sung before. You have to work on figuring out how the new tune goes. It takes practice and playing the new song a lot—so it just flows off our lips, second nature.

Songs are meant to be sung. To be heard by others. Worship is an act of testimony and an act of mission. Speech to God is worship and speech to people is testimony. We need both. David says later in the Psalm, "I make no secret of your merciful love. Glad news of deliverance I have spoken to the congregation. My lips are not sealed." Our praise to God is never complete until it is shared with others. Don't keep the good news of God's deliverance to yourself. Let the graces you've experienced be a blessing to others. "May many see and fear and trust in the Lord," says David. Spread the word—good news is to be shared.

When you're mired in discouragement, remember and recount what God has done in the past. It's an act of discipline. "Your wonders and your purposes are for our good; none can compare with you." Worship reminds us that the good in our lives is a gift from God, not from us.

There's a great true story from Admiral William McRaven's book *Make Your Bed* which uses stories from the Navy SEALs to help you in life. It was Wednesday of Hell Week in the SEAL training class. William McRaven himself was in training at the time. His class went down to the infamous Tijuana mudflats. They'd been without sleep for six days. Instructors were relentlessly harassing them. They'd been through endless running, open ocean swimming, paddling, obstacle courses, and rope climbing. The objective of Hell Week was to crush the weak. The Mudflats was where drainage from San Diego created a large area of muck and mire. They had races in the mud and were cold, wet, and

miserable. The Mudflats are particularly effective at weeding out the wheat from the chaff. Mud covered every inch of their bodies. The density of the mud made the students feel hopeless as they tried to get through it. This went on for hours. As the temperatures dropped, so did morale.

A compassionate SEAL instructor spoke into the bullhorn to the mud-raked students. Come on out—you can join the instructors. We have coffee and chicken soup prepared for you. You can rest, relax, and recover. Come out, and warm up by the fire. All that he needed was five quitters. Just five quitters, and everyone else could finally get some relief.

A fellow student started to make his way out to quit. McRaven grabbed his arm to stay. He pushed him away and made his way to the instructor. He knew others would follow his lead and would also quit. But then above the howling wind, a lone voice started singing. It was a weak, tired, and raspy voice—but loud enough for all to hear. Although it was off key, soon another voice joined his—then two, three, and eventually the whole group became a choir singing in the mud. The student rushed back alongside McRaven and sang as well. The instructor got out the bullhorn ordered the class to stop singing. No one obeyed the orders—they kept singing in the mud. The louder the threats from the instructor, the louder their voices sang. In the light of the fire in the middle of the night, neck-deep in mud, McRaven could see a faint smile on the instructor's face. When you find your life neck-deep in the Swamp of Despond, when everything in you and around you is screaming to give up faith, keep singing.

As Archbishop Desmond Tutu puts it in the *Book of Joy*, "We can endure hardship, without becoming hardened. We may be heartbroken, but we aren't broken."

Remember that we're not alone in the Swamp of Despond. We're singing together in the mud. God is helping us to stay awake and keep watch. Rejoice—help and a hand is on the way to get us out of this quagmire.

Amen.

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