

“In the Miry Bog”

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- ¹*I waited patiently for the LORD; he inclined to me and heard my cry.*
- ²*He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure.*
- ³*He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the LORD.*
- ⁴*Happy are those who make the LORD their trust, who do not turn to the proud, to those who go astray after false gods.*
- ⁵*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.*
- ⁶*Sacrifice and offering you do not desire, but you have given me an open ear. Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required.*
- ⁷*Then I said, “Here I am; in the scroll of the book it is written of me.*
- ⁸*I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.”*
- ⁹*I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation; see, I have not restrained my lips, as you know, O LORD.*
- ¹⁰*I have not hidden your saving help within my heart, I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation; I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness from the great congregation.*
- ¹¹*Do not, O LORD, withhold your mercy from me; let your steadfast love and your faithfulness keep me safe forever.*
(Psalm 40:1-11)

Do you all remember when people were scared of quicksand? Those of us who came of age in the 20th century probably remember that there was a time when quicksand really captured our cultural imagination. It started appearing in movie plots as early as the 1930's, but, sometime around 1950, it started popping up all the time. Maybe it had something to do with the Vietnam conflict, given that, even before people started using the term “quagmire” to describe it, many called it the “quicksand war.”

Also, as the fight for Civil Rights escalated, Martin Luther King, Jr. suggested our entire study was mired in quicksand. On the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, in the midst of his most famous speech, King said, “Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood.”

In a variety of ways, the second half of the 20th Century felt like a time of shifting sands, perilous entanglements, and a sense that one false step could land us in a miry bog, trapped with little chance of escape.

I myself remember that quicksand was a common threat in Saturday morning cartoons. There was also the rumor that circulated among my first-grade classmates at Hampton Elementary School that we better stay away from that sandy patch at the back edge of the playground. We convinced ourselves it was quicksand, and if we went over there we would almost certainly die.

But my clearest recollection came along a few years later when the movie “Blazing Saddles” came out. A key scene focused on two men working on the transcontinental



railroad, who inadvertently drive their handcart into a patch that is not exactly water, but not exactly earth. "Am I wrong," one of them asks, "or is the world rising?" "I don't know," the other says, "but whatever it is, I *hate* it."

Now look, I can't imagine that quicksand bogs have ever been all that common in the United States, but up through the 70's and 80's, quicksand popped up in an exaggerated number of movie and television plots.¹ It was kind of a curiosity, really, why our entertainment focused so disproportionately on quicksand.

Recently, however, something has shifted, and that shift caught the attention of The Slate, a daily online magazine focusing on politics, technology, and culture. Noticing that quicksand was not as popular as it used to be, they did an investigative study that they titled "Terra Infirmis: The Rise and Fall of Quicksand." For the article, one of the things they did was to interview some kids to get the current take on quicksand, to see if they were still as frightened as kids used to be. They picked PS 29 in Brooklyn. Long story short, the answer is no -- kids in Brooklyn are not worried about quicksand. Like at all. They are worried about much bigger dangers, like dragons. That was the number one answer. Makes sense. That was followed closely by monsters under the bed, then big waves at the beach, which can really knock you for a loop if you aren't ready. But not one single fourth grader said they were scared of quicksand. "I think people used to be afraid of it," one boy said as his classmates nodded. "But that was before we were born," his friend added. "Maybe it will come back one day."²

Maybe. Maybe it will come back. Or maybe it never really left. Maybe the answer depends on how old you are and how much living you've done. Because most of us know a little about the sensation of taking a step onto ground you thought was solid, but wasn't... we know what it feels like to sink in circumstances we cannot control... we know the sensation of struggling to get ourselves out of a mess, only to find that the harder we struggle the deeper we sink... in short, we know what it is like to feel stuck.

When we feel like we keep making the same mistakes, hurting ourselves and others, but no matter how hard we try, we just cannot seem to avoid the failure, we feel stuck.

When we would love to get to a new level in a job or a relationship, but the steps required to get there seem overwhelming and unrealistic, we feel stuck.

When we come to a fork in the road but just cannot decide which way to go, or when we are overwhelmed with options to the point of being paralyzed, we feel stuck.³

This is why quicksand captures our imagination. And maybe it is why Psalm 40 also captures our imagination. The psalmist is clearly stuck in ways we understand, but one thing we have to say -- this poet has not lost hope. In fact, I would say that, if we find ourselves today feeling like we are stuck in a bad situation, and our striving and struggling to get out of that situation is not only proving fruitless, but actually making things worse, then this psalm gives us some clues about how we can find a way out of the quicksand.

The first step is to for us to **admit that we are stuck**. As I've heard it said, if you think you are stuck, you probably are. And that's OK. Note that the psalmist who wrote Psalm 40 doesn't spend any time equivocating about their situation or apologizing for it. It is all very matter of fact. They were in a desolate pit, a miry bog, and their legs were sinking

¹ Id.

² http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/science/2010/08/terra_infirma.html

³ Meg Lyons, "Feeling stuck? 7 ways to climb out of a slump," <https://www.betterup.com/blog/feeling-stuck>

down into the muck and they could not find firm footing anywhere. Everybody feels lost or stuck from time to time; it's a part of life. So don't beat yourself up. We can start by being honest with ourselves about our situation, and admitting that we are stuck.

The second step may be the hardest one, and that is to **stop squirming**. It's one of the basics of quicksand – that the more you struggle, the quicker you sink. So, once we recognize that we are stuck, the next thing we need to do is pause and take a breath.

Admittedly, this seems counterintuitive, especially among people who value action and take pride in hard work. It doesn't feel right to just do nothing. But again, the psalm helps us see this differently. In English, we translate the first three words of this psalm as "I waited patiently," one verb and one adverb. But in Hebrew the first two words are actually both verbs – two verbs in a row, two verbs that have the same root, two actions that are basically the same. The Hebrew literally says "To be patient, I waited."

I actually think this helps those of us who cannot imagine being in a tough spot and not working, clawing, and kicking our way out of it. True, this psalm begins with action, but those actions focus on self-discipline and control. If we are stuck in quicksand, the smart move – the life-preserving move -- is to pause, stop squirming, and take a breath.

The third and final key to escaping the quicksand is the thing that transforms what has basically been common sense, self-help advice into an actual sermon... at least I hope it does, because the third step is to **trust God**. It is not always an easy thing to do when we feel like we are in grave danger... when we feel like the wet sand is about to suck us under for good... to just trust that God will save us. But the psalmist is clear about the trust they are willing to put in God. To describe just what they expect to receive from God, they use words like "wondrous deeds," "deliverance," "saving help," "mercy," and "steadfast love and faithfulness."

In fact, the psalmist is not just hoping that God will do these things; the psalmist **knows** God will do these things, because God has **already done** these things. You might have noticed that this psalm is not written in the present tense or the future tense, but in the past tense. The psalmist was in the miry bog, but they aren't anymore. The psalmist was about to die, but that didn't happen, because God really did show up with wondrous deeds and saving help. And that's why the miry bog, the desolate pit, gets only half a line in the whole poem. It was a blip on the radar, a fading spot in the rearview mirror, because the God of heaven and earth had inclined and heard their cry, set their feet upon a rock, and made their footsteps firm once more.

The quicksand? I think the psalmist used to be afraid of it. But that was before we were born.

And maybe it will come back. But if it does, at least the psalmist has told us what we should do. We can admit we are stuck...

we can stop squirming and wait patiently...

and we can trust that God not only hears us, but will come with steadfast love, saving help, and wondrous deeds. **Amen.**