

# THE DESTROYING PIT

In the scroll of the book it is written of me



**T**HE WRITER OF HEBREWS WAS facing a mutiny of faith. Like the young Saul, the Jews were persecuting their countrymen for their newly found faith, and many were considering renouncing Christ and going back under the Torah.

*But recall those earlier days when, after you had been enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and persecution, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion for those who were in prison, and you cheerfully accepted the plundering of your possessions, knowing that you yourselves possessed something better and more lasting. Do not, therefore, abandon that confidence of yours; it brings great reward. For you need endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised.*

The writer seeks to quell the rebellion by demonstrating the inadequacy of Israel's sacrificial system, which fell well short of God's ultimate intentions for mankind. He zeroes in on Yom Kippur, Israel's celebrated Day of Atonement, to show the Old Covenant's shortcomings. The Day was the annual ceremony where the high priest, in great fear and trembling, would enter into the Holy of Holies to make atonement for the people. First he would have to make atonement for his own sins and the sins of his house by means of a sacrifice of a bull.

*[The high priest] shall present the bull as a sin offering for himself, and shall make atonement for himself and for his house; he shall slaughter the bull as a sin offering for himself. He shall take a censer full of coals of fire from the altar before the LORD, and two handfuls of crushed sweet incense, and he shall bring it inside the curtain and put the incense on the fire before the LORD, that the cloud of incense may cover the mercy seat that is upon the covenant, or he will die. He shall take some of the blood of the bull, and sprinkle it with his finger on the front of the mercy seat, and before the mercy seat he shall sprinkle the blood with his finger seven times.*

Once he lived through that proceeding, he'd have to perform the same ceremony with the blood of a goat in order to make atonement for the people.

*He shall slaughter the goat of the sin offering that is for the people and bring its blood inside the curtain, and do with its blood as he did with the blood of the bull, sprinkling it upon the mercy seat and before the mercy seat. Thus he shall make atonement for the sanctuary, because of the uncleannesses of the people of Israel, and because of their transgressions, all their*

*Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Wasn't it necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?*

*sins; and so he shall do for the tent of meeting, which remains with them in the midst of their uncleanness. . . . Then he shall go out to the altar that is before the LORD and make atonement on its behalf, and shall take some blood of the bull and of the blood of the goat, and put it on each of the horns of the altar. He shall sprinkle some of the blood on it with his finger seven times, and cleanse it and hallow it from the uncleannesses of the people of Israel.*

The sacrifices might have covered sins for a while, but what they couldn't do was purge man's sinful nature. The Day had to be repeated again and again because "it is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sins." Sin, its consciousness, and its dreadful consequences required a final and fatal blow, he writes. Otherwise, men's consciences could never be purged and the Day's rituals would have to be repeated endlessly.

After laying this foundation of unending doom, the writer looks back to Psalm 40, a psalm of David. Contemporary preachers descry the psalm as a manifesto of self-help.

Psalm 40 is a song about the pits. It falls into two sections. In the first half, David tells how God got him out of one pit and he sings God's praise for doing so. But he did not then live happily ever after. Rather, it is evident from the second half of the psalm that he is in another pit, crying out to the Lord to deliver him from this one. Because David waited intently on the Lord to rescue him from the first pit, he knew how to wait on the Lord to get him out of the second pit. So it's a psalm about what to do when you're in the pit.

—Steven J. Cole

One of the patterns of life recurring in the psalms is getting in the pits and getting out again. And my favorite statement of this pattern comes from David's experience found in Psalm 40. . . . [The first three verses] present a pattern of life at least part of which every Christian knows first hand. — John Piper

To the ancient Hebrew, a pit was a literal or figurative reference to the grave—to its threat—or to an abyss so deep the dweller within it felt like the living dead. Been there? Me too. —Beth Moore

Penning a sermon we consider to be God-breathed scriptures, the writer doesn't identify the psalm as a commentary of the subjective Christian life experience. He reads it as the prophesied voice of Christ himself:

*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.”*

He recounts the psalm as Jesus’ inner voice setting out why the Father sent him forth, why he became flesh and dwelt among us. God wasn’t pleased with the Groundhog Day sacrificial system where death-doomed priests had to offer up insufficient sacrifices in perpetuity while God’s own presence on earth was walled off in a small room. He observes that when Christ broke into the cosmos to do the Father’s will, it was to offer himself as a sacrifice to conquer the power of sin “once for all.” The Day of Atonement, after all, was implemented to be just a shadow of good things to come, a temporary measure until the Faith appeared and an indestructible priest could offer the blood of God upon the mercy seat in heaven.

*He abolishes the first in order to establish the second.*

*He entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption.*

Reading the psalm as Jesus’ own voice and not just a David-like believer bemoaning a bad day ushers in a more nuanced understanding of the depth and range of “you have prepared a body for me.” The psalm wasn’t written linearly, but in familiar waves, as we see in the other psalms. We hear in different lines of the psalms reverberations of Jesus’ whispered agonies of his being made sin and dying outside the gate, separated from God.

*Let your steadfast love and your faithfulness  
 keep me safe forever;  
 for evils have encompassed me  
 without number;  
 my iniquities have overtaken me  
 until I cannot see;  
 they are more than the hairs of my head,  
 and my heart fails me.*

We also hear his staunch faithfulness to the Father’s will through the three days and nights, until the moment when we could be born from above—“who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.”

*I waited patiently for the LORD;  
 he inclined to me and heard my cry.  
 He drew me up from the destroying pit,  
 out of the miry bog,  
 and set my feet upon a rock,  
 making my steps secure.  
 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.*

English Bibles translate *destroying pit* various ways: desolate pit, pit of wretchedness, seething chasm, watery pit, cistern of roaring. They are all descriptions of Sheol, which other psalms depict as a roaring sea and bottomless abyss. The miry bog, literally the “mud of mud,” depicts it as being inescapable, exhausting all of one’s strength.

*Then the channels of the sea were seen,  
 and the foundations of the world were laid bare  
 at your rebuke, O LORD,  
 at the blast of the breath of your nostrils.  
 He reached down from on high,  
 he took me;  
 he drew me out of many waters.*

Hollywood understands the best stories are all about the hero—how he emerges from humble beginnings, how he discovers his destiny, how he defies powerful evils and forces arrayed against him, and how he overcomes all the odds to save the girl in the end. Centering on the pitiful damsel would make for a very dull movie.

Yet that is what modern preaching has done with the redemptive narrative. It has transformed the epic drama of the one and only Son’s rescue of God’s most cherished creation into a collection of trite leadership truisms and pedestrian self-help principles. The scriptures reveal the remarkable story of why Jesus was bestowed the name above every name, why the elders in Revelation giddily throw their crowns at his feet to worship him, and why just men made perfect will be joyously celebrating the Lord’s Supper with him throughout eternity. Psalm 40 is a prophetic Kodak moment in the drama. Preachers, please don’t take our Kodachrome away. **b**

THE MORE RELIABLE MANUSCRIPTS OF HEBREWS 2:9 READ: “BUT WE DO SEE JESUS, WHO FOR A LITTLE WHILE WAS MADE LOWER THAN THE ANGELS, NOW CROWNED WITH GLORY AND HONOR BECAUSE OF THE SUFFERING OF DEATH, SO THAT APART FROM GOD HE MIGHT TASTE DEATH FOR EVERYONE.”