

Title: God's Salvation
Text: Psalms 40:12-13

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Let us return to today's Scripture reading. Psalm 40:12–13 says: "For troubles without number surround me; my sins have overtaken me, and I cannot see. They are more than the hairs of my head, and my heart fails within me. Be pleased, O Lord, to save me; O Lord, come quickly to help me."

The Korean translation of the Bible that I read renders verse 12 in a striking way. Instead of saying, **"My sins have overtaken me,"** it translates the phrase as: **"My sins have grabbed me by the scruff of the neck."** In Genesis 4, Cain and Abel bring offerings to God. Cain offers produce from the ground, while Abel offers the firstborn and the fat portions from his flock. But God accepts Abel's offering, not Cain's. Cain becomes angry. His face burns with resentment. He cannot understand why his offering was rejected. Then God says to Cain in Genesis 4:6–7, **"Why are you angry?... Sin is crouching at your door."** Cain stands before God angry and wounded because his offering was not accepted, and God warns him, **"Sin is crouching at your door."**

If you watch nature documentaries such as those on *National Geographic*, you sometimes see a lion crouching low before suddenly leaping at its prey. That is the image behind this passage. And when a lion attacks, where does it usually bite? The neck. The lion grabs its prey by the scruff of the neck. That is what sin does.

After fasting for forty days, Jesus was hungry. In the wilderness of Judea—a desert much like the Arizona desert where we live—Jesus spent forty days without food. Where would Jesus, in His humanity, have been most vulnerable? His hunger. Satan targeted that weakness. Like a crouching lion, temptation aimed precisely at His weakest point and lunged for His neck. **"Turn these stones into bread. Eat."** But our Lord defeated the devil through the Word of God.

Yet many times, we are not like that. Many times, sin grabs us by the scruff of the neck. It feels as though everything grows dark before our eyes and our breath is being cut off. **"My sins have overtaken me, and I cannot see. They are more than the hairs of my head, and my heart fails within me."** Our sins seem more numerous than the hairs on our heads. Because of sin, we lose hope. We sink into a swamp of sin and cannot escape by our own strength.

Ethics and morality cannot save us. Psychological healing alone cannot save us. Videos promising success and inspirational sayings filled with worldly wisdom cannot save us. We cannot save ourselves through effort, discipline, or lifestyle changes. Sin is that powerful. The crouching lion blocks the doorway and guards it. We cannot overcome it by ourselves. Someone **must** rescue us. Only through our Savior—not through our own strength, but through Jesus Christ alone—can we

overcome sin and receive salvation.

The reality of humanity trapped in the swamp of sin is described very clearly in Romans chapters 1, 2, and 3. Today, I want to read only Romans 1:24–32. I will read it slowly. I will use *The Message*, translated by Eugene Peterson, because it was written to help modern readers hear and understand Scripture in fresh and vivid language.

So God said, in effect, "If that's what you want, that's what you get." It wasn't long before they were living in a pigpen, smeared with filth, filthy inside and out. And all this because they traded the true God for a fake god, and worshiped the god they made instead of the God who made them—the God we bless, the God who blesses us. Oh, yes!

Worse followed. Refusing to know God, they soon didn't know how to be human either—women didn't know how to be women, men didn't know how to be men. Sexually confused, they abused and defiled one another; women with women, men with men—all lust, no love. And then they paid for it—oh, how they paid for it—emptied of God and love, godless and loveless wretches.

Since they didn't bother to acknowledge God, God quit bothering them and let them run loose. Then all hell broke loose: rampant evil, grabbing and grasping, vicious backstabbing. They made life hell on earth with their envy, wanton killing, bickering, and cheating. Look at them: mean-spirited, venomous, foul-tongued God-bashers. Bullies, swaggerers, insufferable windbags! They keep inventing new ways of wrecking lives. They ditch their parents when they get in the way. Stupid, slimy, cruel, cold-blooded. And it's not as if they don't know better. They know perfectly well they're spitting in God's face. And they don't care—worse, they hand out prizes to those who do the worst things best!

This is the condition of humanity. Left to ourselves, we cannot help but sin. With sin gripping us by the scruff of the neck, our vision grows dark, our hope disappears, and we keep adding sin upon sin as we sink deeper into the swamp. And God responds to sin with righteous anger. Romans 1:18 says: *"But God's angry displeasure erupts as acts of human mistrust and wrongdoing and lying accumulate, as people try to put a shroud over truth."*

God is not indifferent to sin. He is holy and responds to evil with judgment. And what about us? Scripture says that apart from God's grace, we are people under His wrath. Ephesians 2:3 says, **"We were by nature children of wrath."** Eugene Peterson describes our condition with unforgettable words: *"You filled your lungs with polluted unbelief, and then exhaled disobedience."*

Think about that image. We filled our lungs with polluted unbelief, and we breathed out disobedience. Look honestly at your own life. Isn't that often true of us? We inhale unbelief. We

exhale disobedience. Again and again. That is why, apart from God's grace, humanity cannot save itself. By our very nature, we remain children of wrath.

From the moment we are born, we are inclined toward the desires of the flesh. We naturally follow what our bodies and hearts desire. That is why Scripture says that by nature we are children of wrath. Left to ourselves, we cannot save ourselves. We are headed toward destruction and are separated from God.

Throughout Scripture and history, we see sobering reminders of God's judgment. Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by fire and sulfur. The city of Pompeii was buried in a catastrophic volcanic eruption. In the days of Noah, apart from those who entered the ark, no one survived the flood. When people built the Tower of Babel in pride and rebellion, God confused their languages so that they could no longer understand one another. When Korah and the other leaders rebelled against Moses, the earth opened up and swallowed them along with their households.

These are sobering reminders of the reality of God's judgment. But, dear friends, is that God's deepest heart? Is that who God truly is? Is God only terrifying and angry, waiting to condemn the people He created? No. A few verses later in today's passage, Psalm 40:16 says, "But may all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you; may those who love your salvation say continually, 'Great is the Lord!'"

Dear brothers and sisters, God is the God of salvation. From the very beginning, God has desired to save us. God desires that every soul become His child. God delights when those whom He has saved rejoice in His salvation and continually proclaim, "**Great is the Lord!**" Even though we are by nature children of wrath, God does not abandon us. He is good. He seeks us, saves us, and makes us His own children.

That is the heart of God. That is why He sent Jesus Christ. And in Christ, God's final word to us is not wrath, but salvation, grace, and life. Amen!

Some of you may remember the news from two years ago, in 2024, about my home country, South Korea. On December 3, 2024, the president declared martial law during a political crisis, creating fear and uncertainty across the nation. Thankfully, the declaration lasted only six hours, and within days impeachment proceedings led to the suspension of his presidential powers.

Something very similar happened when I was a freshman in college. At that time, a group of military leaders seized power through a coup and took control of the country. For nearly a year, the entire nation lived under fear and oppression, and many people lost their lives under the military regime. You may know that the Korean writer Han Kang won the Nobel Prize in Literature

in 2024; one of her works reflects on that painful period in Korean history.

Back then, I participated in the student movement resisting the military dictatorship and calling for democracy. One evening, after getting off the subway and walking toward the exit, I suddenly found myself in a terrifying situation. I looked unmistakably like a college student. At that time, college students were required to participate in military training, and the pants I was wearing were part of that uniform. I was carrying a bag that clearly identified me as a student. Inside my bag were banned books and my diary. In that diary, I had written reflections opposing the dictatorship and notes about those forbidden books.

At almost every subway station, police officers and soldiers were stationed at the exits to inspect people. College students were frequently stopped and searched. If someone was caught carrying prohibited materials, the consequences could be severe. People were detained, and some suffered terrible abuse. Several of my friends experienced that firsthand. At that moment, everything went dark before my eyes. I looked exactly like the kind of person they would stop, and I had those dangerous items in my bag.

Fortunately, it was rush hour. The exit gates were crowded, and the flow of people slowed to a crawl. Standing there, I prayed desperately. Although I attended church, I did not yet have genuine faith and was living a very secular life. Still, I prayed: "God, please—just this once. Please save me this one time. If You save me now, I will do whatever You want me to do. I'll even become a pastor." With that desperate, one-sentence prayer, I was carried forward by the crowd. Amazingly, they did not stop me. I was spared.

But afterward, I forgot all about that moment and continued living recklessly, as though nothing had happened. Then one day, for reasons I still cannot fully explain, I decided to study English using a Gideon Bible as my textbook. It was a New Testament distributed free of charge to high school students by The Gideons International, with English on one side of each page and Korean on the other. One of the most difficult parts of learning English is constantly looking up words in a dictionary, but with that Bible, I didn't have to.

I began with Matthew chapter 1 and continued through Mark and Luke. I still vividly remember reading Luke chapter 2 and suddenly realizing, "This is not just a book for learning English." I took my mother's Bible—the one with the black leather cover and red-edged pages—from her church bag and started again at Matthew chapter 1. The sweetness and goodness of God's Word drew me in so deeply that I read through the night. Within a few days, I had finished the entire New Testament. Then I continued with Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and the rest of the Old Testament. As I read the Bible, I repented of my sins and joyfully received Jesus Christ as my Savior.

At that time, I was carrying a deep weariness caused by uncertainty, fear, and the violence surrounding me. Then, through what seemed like a small and unexpected beginning—the reading of Scripture—my outward circumstances did not immediately change, but my inner life was completely transformed. I received God's salvation with joy.

Dear friends, God saves sinners through Jesus Christ. I believe many of you already know that saving grace. By nature, we were children of wrath. I truly could have lost my life, but God spared me. Through the grace of the cross, He saved us and gave us new life.

Even today, by that same grace, God walks with us and leads us to live lives filled with gratitude and joy. Thanks be to God. Amen.