



Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

A lifeline of hope

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Psalm 40

¹ I waited patiently for the LORD;
he turned to me and heard my cry.

² He lifted me out of the slimy pit,
out of the mud and mire;
he set my feet on a rock
and gave me a firm place to stand.

³ He put a new song in my mouth,
a hymn of praise to our God.
Many will see and fear the LORD
and put their trust in him.

⁴ Blessed is the one
who trusts in the LORD,
who does not look to the proud,
to those who turn aside to false gods.

⁵ Many, LORD my God,
are the wonders you have done,
the things you planned for us.
None can compare with you;
were I to speak and tell of your deeds,
they would be too many to declare.

⁶ Sacrifice and offering you did not desire—
but my ears you have opened—
burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require.

⁷ Then I said, 'Here I am, I have come—
it is written about me in the scroll.

⁸ I desire to do your will, my God;
your law is within my heart.'

⁹ I proclaim your saving acts in the great assembly;
I do not seal my lips, LORD,
as you know.

¹⁰ I do not hide your righteousness in my heart;
I speak of your faithfulness and your saving help.
I do not conceal your love and your faithfulness
from the great assembly.

¹¹ Do not withhold your mercy from me, LORD;
may your love and faithfulness always protect me.

¹² 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.

¹³ Be pleased to save me, LORD;

come quickly, LORD, to help me.

¹⁴ May all who want to take my life
be put to shame and confusion;
may all who desire my ruin
be turned back in disgrace.

¹⁵ May those who say to me, 'Aha! Aha!'
be appalled at their own shame.

¹⁶ But may all who seek you
rejoice and be glad in you;
may those who long for your saving help always say,
'The LORD is great!'

¹⁷ But as for me, I am poor and needy;
may the Lord think of me.
You are my help and my deliverer;
you are my God, do not delay."

One of Alan Walker's gifts was the kind required of anyone leading a church or movement such as Wesley Mission—and that is to draw people into the work in such a way that they were prepared to do almost anything to achieve the God-given goals.

Eric Adam had known Alan Walker for many years and so when he moved back to Sydney he was pleased his friendship with Alan was renewed. Alan was soon to be invited ... though this was not a straightforward process ... to be the Superintendent of the large Central Methodist Mission. The work included the Lyceum Theatre, the Evangelists Institute and a large number of homes and hospitals which catered mainly for those in later life.

Eric and Alan were in the car one evening in 1960 and were discussing I Challenge the Minister, an extremely popular Sunday afternoon television program in which Alan stood before an audience, who threw difficult questions to him.

Alan commented that people had started to ring him at home and ask questions not on television but in a telephone conversation. He was getting more than he could handle.

The telephone was becoming increasingly powerful and no longer merely restricted to the wealthy. Indeed, throughout our vast country the telephone was absolutely essential for communication ... and it would soon open up links which would provide assistance for people in need.

It was a crisis call to Alan Walker that did not end well which became the powerful driver of the need to provide an appropriate service to help people at the end of their tether.

It caused Alan to think about the work of Flynn of the Inland who used the pedal wireless telephone in the Outback as 'A Mantle over the Inland'. In his mind was the idea that if he could get a group of people available on a recognisable telephone number, properly trained and passionate about this work, he could do a tremendous amount of good. He also considered it possible to get this up and running very quickly.

There are many stories surrounding the beginning of Lifeline ... but some don't recognise the enormous amount of work that went into those early days of launching such a service. In fact, it took the best part of three years to set up the organisation: establishing standards, providing the necessary facilities and properly training teams to do the work.

Alan firstly called people from the Central Mission to join him in the exploration. Committed men and women met at our Roseville Manse to pray this service into being.

The gospel hymn 'Throw out a lifeline' may well have been an inspiration, but it was also an article in the Sydney Morning Herald entitled 'Lifeline for Sydney' which guided the search for a suitable name.

Alan and others were particularly attracted to the thought of Lifeline because of its obvious links with surfing, where someone in trouble would call for help. It was considered a very Australian title.

Many funds were generated, chiefly from the Central Methodist Mission and our donors beyond ... and eventually, when the plans were being finalised, the Darlinghurst building was purchased and fitted out.

The Lord Mayor of Sydney carried out the opening ceremony on 16 March 1963, with a crowd of over two and a half thousand in attendance. People were asked to leave the building in time for the phones to open at five o'clock.

Alan and Eric were the only ones left. They went up to the counselling room and at a minute past five the phone rang. Eric said to Alan, 'You pick it up,' but he said, 'No! You pick it up. You are on duty.' The first answer was, 'This is the Lifeline Centre—can I help you.'

The telephone call involved a relationship issue and the one on duty was able to point the distressed young woman in the direction of help through our Teenage Cabaret.

Clearly the Lifeline program has become much more sophisticated, but these early stories are very important. In September 1966, Lifeline International held its convention in Sydney, just three years after the establishment of the then unique service.

As we meet this evening, we celebrate 50 years of a service which has grown in size, developed in delivery and provided help to millions of people.

To understand the origins of Lifeline and its purpose, the two Fontana books *Lifeline* and *Caring for the World* are indispensable. It was four years after the formation of Lifeline that Alan wrote, 'Lifeline is built on the Christian faith. It believes that it can reach to the depth of the need of a city, because God in Christ has already found that need and answered it. Faith in what God has done, what God can do, is the inspiration of Lifeline.'

I choose the Psalm to which Alan frequently referred.

Psalm 40 was given the title 'Enigma Variations' by one writer. The use of Edward Elgar's theme was a way of suggesting that the psalm reveals the complexity of life and that it is to be played by more than one kind of instrument.

It has an element of the insoluble enigma. It tells of one rescued from a pit and set safely on his way ... and yet he slithers back by the end of the psalm. It presents challenges for us, unless we see it as the psalmist's way of saying our prayer for help needs to be continual.

I take the first three verses.

Alan Walker wrote about this psalm and, in particular, the fact that the 'life line from God lifts us from the depths of depression and despair.'

The imagery of a miry pit made sense to those who first heard or used these words. In ancient days, they were all too aware of underground cisterns, road wash-outs and disused wells. But the term symbolises a desolate experience. It doesn't require a great deal of

imagination or accuracy of definition to see it as a place in life where a person finds themselves 'helpless'.

Life holds many challenges

In the Lifeline story, there is the mention of the fact that many people are trapped by compulsive habits. Our contemporary understanding of addictions certainly fits into this bracket.

The psalm would seem to be the result of liturgical efforts to put into worship the very real experiences of life. Among any group of people at worship is the acknowledgement that life can collapse very quickly.

I recall a family with two small children in a suburban setting. They wanted to sell their house and had already identified somewhere for the next stage of their lives. In the process of selling the house, it came to light that underneath lay a major coal seam ... and, not far from their home, there was a shaft that had previously been overlooked in searches. What followed was nearly a year living in a hotel and continual stress.

This news was revealed within half an hour, but it changed their life arguably for all time. Such is the nature of what can happen to people. Many who make telephone calls to Lifeline could testify to the speed of calamity that can overtake us in life. Additionally, there are still others who could tell of their constant inability to rise from their experience of despair.

In these situations it is vital to acknowledge:

- Help is available
- A listening ear is so important
- God's help can be made available through people who offer themselves to him in service.

I realise this 'God element' in Lifeline is less comfortable for some ... but, as our founder would have done, I ride into the eye of any perceived storm to say we have never made secret our Christian purpose. However, we have also sought to resist manipulation of human need as an excuse to preach the gospel. Every person needs to know they are cared for and that the deepest needs of a human life are met in a restored relationship with God. Holding those two aspects together remains our greatest challenge. I recall a conversation with Alan Walker about this issue in Plymouth during a mission in 1983.

In the earliest days, the link with the Superintendent himself and other senior staff was key to responding to some needs ... and the appointment of people like Rev Peter Storey from Southern Africa showed both a commitment of resources and the vision of the then Central Mission. However, from the outset, the power of the volunteer has made the difference.

Of course it has been wonderful to have a formal Reception in Government House, hosted by Her Excellency, Professor Marie Bashir ... and to have the Premier of NSW, Barry O'Farrell MP, speak so well of Lifeline in the Question Time John Brogden, Ivan Reichelt and I attended on Thursday.

However, these special occasions don't take away from the real challenge that remains: How do we respond to a growing need in our community?

- Where loneliness still holds its powerful grip on lives
- Where mental health challenges are of such high proportions

- Where still the greatest and most difficult work is to harness and grow the numbers of trained volunteers—and to find new and imaginative ways of meeting human need.

The accolades, like all awards, status and recognition, are only important if they can help towards the building of a better community. So let us celebrate the birthday of Lifeline, but also seek to grow its work through innovation, connection and care.

God provides a place of perspective

It is very interesting that the psalm provides a picture of God's help in the life of one in the pit of despair. Many writers have talked about what follows in the psalm ... that is worship (v.v. 4–6), obedience (v.v. 7–9) and witness (v.v.10–12). But I find the deliverance of God that is brought to the one in trouble makes greatest sense by the fact that he is lifted to a place of ultimate trust.

The need for security is a part of life, especially for those who face recurrent fears. Many look for security in the wrong places ... and such security can only be temporary.

Alan Walker's comments are helpful: 'There is only one security which never passes away: God himself. Possessions are easily swept away, work and achievements can pall, love, even though it be white-hot, can burn down to ashes. The love of God endures. The rock of salvation stands. The presence of God persists even through death. "The Lord sets my feet upon a rock."'

The secret centre of God's deliverance is that he gives us a place to stand. Some old translations of the psalm talk about God 'establishing our goings'.

From time to time, a media opportunity arises and invariably the question will be: 'Can we interview people who have been helped by the service in question?'

With Lifeline, we retain the same dignity as in all our other centres ... we don't cross boundaries of privacy. However, there are thousands of people helped each year across Australia by the Lifeline service.

Since 5 pm on 16 March 1963, when the phones were opened, they have not stopped ringing. The reasons for people's calls cover the whole gamut of human need: 'From plain loneliness to extreme suicidal despair, from the tempted to the defeated ...' We acknowledge the increased pressure of mental illness and calls from those some might call 'time wasters' ... but they are from troubled souls too.

Each and every Australian knows the power of the imagery and ritual of the lifesaver on our beaches. Suddenly a rip develops, a sandbank collapses and a swimmer is in trouble. An upraised arm brings the lifesaving team into action. The lifeline is so important. Skilfully, rescued and rescuer are drawn through the waves, against the pull of the current. At last the beach is reached. The lifeline has made possible the saving of another life.

Lifeline was described as 'an idea whose time had come'. That idea has not concluded and, in addition to a wonderful past, it has much to offer for the future ... and we thank God for 50 years of an open line.

Long may it continue!