



## Psalm 41 - Assurance of God's Help and a Plea for Healing

To the leader. A Psalm of David.

### Introduction

This is a lament in which a person who fulfils his responsibilities to the poor, and yet is suffering severely, prays for God's help and vindication. The psalm describes a serious illness but can be applied more generally if the illness is taken as simply one example of severe suffering.

### Psalm 41:1-3 - The Lord Sustains Those Who Are Kind to the Poor.

The opening section expresses true covenantal faith: the person who considers the poor is kind to them because they are fellow members of God's own people; usually 'the poor' in the OT refers specifically to the poor in Israel. Presumably his kindness includes both financial help and energetic protection of them from exploitation. These 'poor' are 'weak' in influence, and therefore this person's kindness is also generous, extended in the knowledge that they cannot pay it back. God honours the person who shows such kindness in true covenant faith; he delivers him, protects him, and more specifically, sustains him on his sickbed.

- 1 Happy are those who consider the poor;  
the Lord delivers them in the day of trouble.
- 2 The Lord protects them and keeps them alive;  
they are called happy in the land.  
You do not give them up to the will of their enemies.
- 3 The Lord sustains them on their sickbed;

in their illness you heal all their infirmities.

### Psalm 41:1-3

Happy are those who consider the poor. The idea behind the word here translated poor may include economic poverty, but is broader. It has the idea of weak or helpless. David described the blessings that come to the righteous man or woman, and he summarises the life of that righteous one by their generosity to the poor. David did not think that this was the only thing that marked the godly, but it was a significant thing.

Upon reflection, he who considers the poor, that is, the weak, helpless, and poor, is a broad measure of the righteous man or woman. He who considers the poor:

- Trusts God, willing to give from his own resources.
- Is kind to those in need.
- Helps those who likely will not help him in return.
- Has a generous heart.
- Gives for their good, not simply to make himself feel good.

Much charity work, by religious, social, and political organisations, fails in this measure. Money and assistance is given, but in a way that contributes to chronic dependence and deeply ingrained social problems.

The Lord delivers them in the day of trouble. This begins a list of several blessings that David observed came to the generous person. This was especially true under the Old Covenant, sometimes also called the Mosaic Covenant. An essential aspect of that covenant was blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience, as detailed in Deuteronomy Chapter 28.

The Lord protects them and keeps them alive. It is God who sustains all life, although all humans are mortal and will die at some point: *<<And just as it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgement, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him>>* (Hebrews 9:27-28). This does not apply to those who are alive when Jesus does return: *<<Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord for ever>>* (1 Thessalonians 4:17).

They are called happy in the land or they will be blessed on the earth. This is another indication that this promise of blessing for obedience was connected to the Old Covenant, which dealt much more with earthly and physical blessings than with eternal and spiritual matters.

The Lord sustains them on their sickbed; in their illness you heal all their infirmities. Most commentators believe that David's misery and low state in this psalm was due to sickness (v.8) and perhaps in danger of death (v.5). David trusted that God would bless him for his prior goodness to the weak and needy.

Once again, this statement should not be taken as an absolute. There are many people who become well through their natural defences, others through medical intervention and still others through divine and miraculous healing. However, good people also die from their illnesses just as bad people do: <<*for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous*>> (Matthew 5:45b).

#### Psalm 41:4-10 My Enemies Hope for My Death.

From the statement of faith the singer turns to his present situation of serious illness, compounded with the malice of those impatient for his death.

- 4 As for me, I said, 'O Lord, be gracious to me;  
heal me, for I have sinned against you.'
- 5 My enemies wonder in malice  
when I will die, and my name perish.
- 6 And when they come to see me, they utter empty words,  
while their hearts gather mischief;  
when they go out, they tell it abroad.

#### Psalm 41:4-6

O Lord, be gracious to me. Without saying it directly, David seemed to appeal to God on the basis of his own good works, especially consideration of the poor (v.1). In light of his relative righteousness and on the terms of the Old Covenant, David could ask God and did ask God for mercy and blessing.

Heal me, for I have sinned against you. David knew that he had done much good, but that did not erase his sins. He understood that his sins were directed against God and that they made him like a sick or injured person who needed healing in his soul. His body was sick, but more important was his spirit. That David needed healing for his soul can be thought of in at least three ways:

- Heal his soul from its great distress.
- Heal his soul of the effect of sin.
- Heal his soul of his tendency to sin.

David made a plain and honest confession of his sins when he said I have sinned against you. He gives:

- A confession without excuse.
- A confession without qualification.
- A confession without superficiality.

My enemies wonder in malice. David knew the hurt and difficulty of evil and lies spread about him. Like believers of all ages David had to endure outrageous slander and defamation of character.

The early history of Christianity reveals the reasons why Christians were persecuted, or at least why people in the Roman Empire thought Christians were worthy of persecution:

- They accused Christians of hostility to the emperors and conspiracy against the state.
- They accused Christians of incest.
- They accused Christians of cannibalism.
- They accused Christians of being atheists.
- They accused Christians of being haters of humanity.
- They accused Christians of being the reason why problems plagued the empire.

The enemies of early church spoke evil against the followers of Jesus, and they spoke lies, despite the fact that most Christians:

- Were good citizens and prayed for the emperor.
- Lived pure moral lives.
- Never practiced anything like cannibalism.
- Were certainly not atheists.
- Loved others, and showed it all the time.
- Made the empire better, not worse.

Still, these lies were commonly believed and Christians were persecuted because of them. The apologists of the early church did what they could to tell the truth, but to be honest it was a losing public relations battle. These lies were popularly believed.

When I will die, and my name perish. This is what the evil-speaking enemies of David said among themselves. They could not wait for David to die, and they did whatever they could to bring his death to pass.

Their hearts gather mischief. David thought of the evil heart like a magnet, constantly drawing additional sin and iniquity unto itself.

- 7 All who hate me whisper together about me;  
they imagine the worst for me.
- 8 They think that a deadly thing has fastened on me,  
that I will not rise again from where I lie.
- 9 Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted,  
who ate of my bread, has lifted the heel against me.
- 10 But you, O Lord, be gracious to me,  
and raise me up, that I may repay them.

### Psalm 41:7-10

All who hate me whisper together about me. David knew of, or at least could sense, the whispered conspiracies set in motion against him, meant to devise and prolong his hurt.

They think that a deadly thing has fastened on me. This may have been true. David described such a time of illness in Psalm 38:3 and 38:6-8. David's enemies were happy at the thought that he might die and will not rise again from his sickbed. It can be imagined just how his enemies, probably pretended friends, said this of David as he suffered on his sickbed.

One expects enemies to be treacherous, but here the pain of betrayal comes from his bosom friend, who had received only kindness and who has now lifted the heel against the singer. Jesus applies this to Judas: <<*I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But it is to fulfil the scripture, "The one who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me"*>> (John 13:18), who has received only kindness, including a recent foot-washing, from Jesus; this enables the reader both to see the pain Jesus underwent for the sake of his own, and the callous treachery of Judas.

But you, O Lord, be gracious to me, and raise me up, that I may repay them. David prayed not only for forgiveness and deliverance, but also for triumph over his enemies. As the Lord's anointed, he felt justified in this, and looked for God's deliverance as evidence that God was pleased with him (v.11).

### Psalm 41:11-12 - But I Am Sure You Will Uphold Me.

The singer returns to the faith of vv.1-3; given that faith, he can be confident that God will continue to honour his integrity, specifically his dedicated kindness to the poor (v.1).

<sup>11</sup> By this I know that you are pleased with me;  
because my enemy has not triumphed over me.

<sup>12</sup> But you have upheld me because of my integrity,  
and set me in your presence for ever.

### Psalm 41:11-12

You have upheld me because of my integrity. David felt that in contrast to his enemies he was a man of integrity. Still, he needed God to uphold him in his integrity, recognising that it was God's work in him.

And set me in your presence for ever. This was the most important thing to David, more important than triumph over his enemies. To be set before the face of God meant to enjoy his favour and fellowship. All the benefits of vv.11-12 are in the present tense. David did not believe that God would bring them to him; he believed that he had them already.

### Psalm 41:13 - Doxology Concluding Book 1.

Each of the five books of the Psalter ends with a doxology, refer also to 72:18-19, 89:52, 106:48 and 150:6. Three do not seem to be part of their psalms (v.13, 72:18-19 and 89:52. Psalm 150 as a whole concludes both Book 5 and the Psalter.

<sup>13</sup> Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel,  
from everlasting to everlasting.

Amen and Amen.

### Psalm 41:13

Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel. Many commentators believe that this is an end, not only to this psalm, but to the entire first Book of the Psalms. Here, Yahweh is honoured as the covenant God of Israel. It was fitting for him to end the song with his eyes on the Lord, not upon himself or his enemies.

**The five Books of the Psalms are as follows:**

- Book 1 - Psalms 1 to 41 (41 psalms).
- Book 2 - Psalms 42 to 72 (31 psalms).
- Book 3 - Psalms 73 to 89 (17 psalms).
- Book 4 - Psalms 90 to 105 (17 psalms).
- Book 5 - Psalms 106 to 150 (44 psalms).

From everlasting to everlasting. The Lord is to be praised as the eternal God, stretching from eternity past to eternity future.