

A LITURGICAL PSALM FOR THE SICK

Psalm 41

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Psalm 41—a rather brief psalm. “For the director of music” means it was a psalm that was initially sung. Another of the psalms of David.

We’re at the close of the first book of the psalms. Out of the forty-one psalms, all but one of them had been written by David. The psalms have been divided into five different books.

“Blessed is he who has regard for the weak; the LORD delivers him in times of trouble. The LORD will protect him and preserve his life; he will bless him in the land and not surrender him to the desire of his foes. The LORD will sustain him on his sickbed and restore him from his bed of illness. I said, ‘O LORD, have mercy on me; heal me, for I have sinned against you.’ My enemies say of me in malice, ‘When will he die and his name perish?’ Whenever one comes to see me, he speaks falsely, while his heart gathers slander; then he goes out and spreads it abroad. All my enemies whisper together against me; they imagine the worst for me, saying, ‘A vile disease has beset him; he will never get up from the place where he lies.’ Even my close friend, whom I trusted, he who shared my bread, has lifted up his heel against me. But you, O LORD, have mercy on me; raise me up, that I may repay them. I know that you are pleased with me, for my enemy does not triumph over me. In my integrity you uphold me and set me in your presence forever. Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Amen and Amen”
(Psalm 41:1–13, NIV).

I have given this psalm a real funny title, “A Liturgical Psalm for the Sick.” Liturgical—a wonderful word used in more formal churches. When you follow a very structured order of worship, you call it a “liturgy.” Actually, any worship service has a liturgy. Sometimes the

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difference is whether you print your liturgy or not, or how sophisticated you are when you print it. But “liturgy” is from the Greek word which means “worship.” It is a way of moving through an act of worship.

It appears that Psalm 41 was written by David to refer, first of all, to some instance of healing in his life where he came out of illness. But it also seems to have been used within the worship of the temple for someone who came in Old Testament times who was ill and was coming to receive a prayer for healing by the priest who was officiating in the temple. Or who we would call “a minister” today. There appears to have been, in this psalm, a formalized process whereby a person could use this psalm of David as an instrument for calling upon God for their healing. The order of the liturgy was something like this: verses 1–3 find the priest or the minister speaking to the person who has come. He was probably chanting this or singing this. Then the person who has come (verses 4–10) will express their cry for help and why they want to be healed. Then verses 11–12, the third part of the psalm, will still be on the part of the person who has come for healing. But now he or she is expressing confidence that God indeed has heard and answered the prayer. Then the last verse is a benediction or a blessing to God for who He is and His character.

This is one of the many illness psalms in the Psalter. This is actually the third illness psalm that we have looked at. The others are Psalm 6 and Psalm 38. Then Psalm 41 here. And more that will come up as we continue to move through the Psalter.

One of the things you will notice about the illness psalms in the Book of Psalms is, so very frequently, there is a connection made between sin and sickness. Both in Psalm 38 and here, in Psalm 41, David explicitly ascribes his illness to the presence of sin in his life. Psalm 6, which is a shorter psalm of illness, doesn't quite go into the detail of linking illness and sin together,

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although it does start by making reference to the wrath of God being on him. It's therefore easy to see, when you flip through the pages of the New Testament, that people have a view that all illness is the result of sin—in looking at the Psalter and seeing continual references interlinking sin and sickness. In David's case, it's not too surprising to see that he linked the two, because his conscience was so driven by the kinds of deeds that he did that when he fell sick, it was easy for him to consider it his just dessert, and in some cases, I would say that was right—that his illness indeed was linked to his sin.

The one person in the Old Testament that stands against linking sin with sickness is Job. If it weren't for Job, we could almost make a closed book out of a lot of emphases on the Old Testament on those two. There are many times in Scripture, and especially in the psalms, where there's a linkage between the two. It takes Jesus coming after Job to de-link these two and indicate that there is not always a connection at all. Jesus says concerning the man born blind, when He's asked, "Who sinned, this man or his parents?" "Neither, but that the glory of God might be manifest" (John 9:2–3).

As we see in looking at Psalm 41, we find a person who is paranoid, and maybe the paranoia is real. Maybe, on the other hand, when you're down you tend to see shadows on the wall. David did have a lot of real enemies. But when you're sick, you tend to magnify your problems and minimize your strengths. We see that coming through in this psalm.

We must be careful that, when we say Psalm 41 when we're ill, we know that the illness has nothing to do with personal sin in our own life. Therefore, there will be elements of the psalm that we'll simply skip over and say, "This doesn't apply to me." But when we are feeling bad physically, it's easy for us to be down on ourselves.

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In the case of David, God may indeed have been punishing him with an illness, or David may simply be expressing his feelings, whether or not those feelings actually correspond to God's reality. Our feelings are always true about how we feel, but they may not be true regarding the way things are. It doesn't make it true because I feel some way.

Psalm 41 cannot only be prayed when we're ill, but we can take the word "weak" that's used in verse 1 and let it characterize any time in our life when we're kind of down. It's a negative, but it doesn't have to be true. The negative by David's enemies was that he will never get up from the place where he lies. What a helpful attitude that is!

This describes times when we're down and people don't think we're going to be able to get back up. Down for the count.

I. First, the priestly blessing in verses 1–3.

It begins with the beatitude "blessed," which is picked up by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. The fifth beatitude is drawn straight out of this psalm. "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy" (Matthew 5:7). In other words, the person has come and they're ill and they're coming to the minister or priest and the priest begins speaking to them, "Blessed is the one who has regard for the weak" (Psalm 41:1). Why he is saying that? When coming for a prayer for illness, you're in a position of weakness, but the idea behind that phraseology is that it's only fair to ask God to help you if in your own life you've demonstrated mercy and help toward other people. Unlike the person who has had power to help, but has said to other people who have been in need, "I don't have time to help you. Go your own way." Then you get in a jam yourself and who are you—who has pushed everybody else aside all your life—to come to God? Jesus draws out of this first verse.

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The psalm is saying that it is the person who puts into life something that can now draw it out.

The person who has put into the account a deposit of mercy and grace and helped others. The psalmist is stating a great reality of life: that the compassionate person will find compassion. And the forgiving person will find forgiveness. Jesus teaches this clearly.

That's not to say that God isn't going to ever heal anybody who's been a coldhearted, cruel person. Because God's grace has the marvelous ability to override all our shortages. What David is saying is that the human being who has never helped another human being does not have much claim to God's grace and mercy when he himself stands in need.

Fortunately, God goes way beyond the limits we set for Him sometimes. The priest announces seven great things which the Lord has committed to do for him. They are really designed to inspire our faith. In praying for healing or for God to change our circumstances, we can err on one or two extremes. We can assume that God is always obligated to intervene, and on the other hand, we can say, "Whatever will be, will be. I'll breathe up a little prayer, but I don't expect much to happen."

The tone of the prayer that's sounded by the priest in verses 1–3 is positive and dynamic. It's faith-filled. God is committed to you. And these are the seven things that the priest announces God is committed to doing.

A. Deliver him in times of trouble. God's purpose for the ill or the weak is not that the trouble or the illness drown him or ruin them or bring them to naught. But God's purpose, first of all, is deliverance.

B. Protection. The Lord will protect him or her.

C. The Lord will preserve his or her life. The priest is saying to him, "The Lord is going to deliver you in your time of trouble. The Lord is going to protect you and preserve you."

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D. Bless him in the land.

E. Not surrender him to the desire of his foes.

F. Sustain him on his sickbed.

G. Restore him from his bed of illness.

What a tremendous thing to read as you're going into surgery!

What does the person say who comes for prayer? He's going to ask for mercy.

II. David, in these verses (1–10), cites four reasons why the Lord is being asked to be gracious and to heal him.

A. The first reason is simply that he's sick. "Have mercy upon me." We have this wonderful understanding that God is concerned about us and our needs, concerned about us when we're down.

B. The second reason why he's asking God to be gracious and asking for healing is because he's confessed his sins. He's got everything clean. Illness does allow the soul to get cleansed of anything wrong in life. Sickness brings us to a time in which we want to purge our soul. David is saying, "I've been there. I've been at the gate of death and looked at my life and I realize there's gunk in it that needs to be dealt with. It's clean now. I've confessed it to You."

C. The third reason he's asking God to heal him is because of the inordinate treachery of his friends. In a position of power and authority, you're going to pick up enemies. The higher you go in responsibility in a company or in politics or sometimes in a church, you're going to pick up people who aren't exactly overjoyed you're in that position. They're going to shoot at you!

David knows there are going to be people who are glad he's down.

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Verses 5–9 tell us what his enemies are doing. Four wonderful things are happening. They’re hoping he will die. The second thing they’re doing is being two-faced. “He spreads false things about me while his heart gathers slander.”

The third thing his enemies are doing is writing him off. “A vile disease has beset him and he’ll never get up from the place where he lies.” With the political intrigue that swirled around David, people are jockeying for the position of establishing themselves as king-elect. The idea that he may be down for the count would give rise to the possible succession of someone else.

The fourth thing was, not only did he have enemies hoping he would die, being two-faced and writing him off, but there’s the betrayal of a close friend. Verse 9. It’s your friends who can hurt you. The people who are close to you.

David knows that. “The one who shared my bread has lifted up his heel.” The idea of “lifting up his heel” we would translate as “He or she is a real ‘heel.’” “Low down” is the idea of the heel. Low down on the ground.

Isn’t it interesting that this is the text that Jesus quotes of Judas in John 13:18 and says that this Scripture might be fulfilled that, “He who has eaten bread with me has lifted up his heel against me”? It’s interesting that Jesus quoted from a psalm that has no reference to Him. I take that as encouragement. When I’m reading psalms and one part fits me, I lift it out and use it. The Lord did that himself.

There are three things so far that David has based his request for mercy on. First, his sickness. Second, his confession of sin. Third, the inordinate treachery of his friend.

D. The fourth reason he wants to be made well is that he might repay his enemies. Verse 10 says, “You, O LORD, have mercy upon me. Raise me up that I may repay them.” Revenge. David

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could be man of mercy, but he's looking forward to that delicious opportunity to give them their just desserts. We've encountered this a lot of times in the psalms.

How I would read this verse, in the context of Christ and the cross, is, "Lord, make me strong enough again so I can repay them. What I want to repay them with is not vengeance, but grace and mercy. Make me strong enough, through this weakness and vulnerability, so that, when I recover, I'll have more strength to forgive and show mercy than I've ever had in my life." I think that's how we Christianize that verse.

Let's not judge David too harshly about wanting to repay. Let's face it. When we're down, one of the things we need is a fighting spirit. If when you're down, your fight goes out of you, you're in a lot of trouble psychologically. Even though he couldn't go anywhere at that moment, he at least wanted to get up and fight. I think that's a very vital attitude for living.

III. The psalm goes into the third part, verses 11–12. The plea for God's mercy is over and now David is giving an assurance of answered prayer.

"I know you are pleased with me." Confidence. This is how our confidence needs to be when we've gotten the sin out of our life and laid it before Him. We can say with confidence, "I know, LORD, You are pleased with me. For my enemy does not triumph over me and in my integrity you uphold me and set me in your presence forever" (Psalm 41:11–12).

Maybe you're uncomfortable praying a prayer like verse 12. Can we lay claim to personal integrity when we're going through a difficult spot? David can. Earlier in the psalm he could have pled his integrity because he still had sin, but now he has dealt with that and he remained convinced that what he stood for was just and right, that his motives and his actions were just. In such a spirit, he stands before God. "Now and always. You will protect me Lord and keep me in Your presence."

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IV. The thirteenth verse is a fourth part of the psalm, which is a benediction.

“Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Amen and Amen”

(Psalm 41:13).

As you go through the five books of the psalms, in the last verse of every section you will find a similar praise or doxology or benediction. Each division of the Psalter ends that way. Psalm 41:13 and in Psalm 72:18–19, the second division of the Psalter, the same thing happens again. In the third division of the Psalter, the last verse of Psalm 89—verse 52—again a word of praise. The fourth division ends in Psalm 106:48. And in the last of the psalms, instead of just getting one verse that’s a word of praise, you have a single psalm. Psalm 150 is a hymn of praise or doxology to God. What these doxologies are doing is expressing what the heart of the psalms is. It’s interesting how we use a term and never know what it really means. The word “psalm” literally means, in the Hebrew, “praise.” So the entire Psalter consists of praises to God. How appropriate that when we’ve been down, ill, and now have been restored and back up, we should say a word of praise to the Lord for what He’s done. May this psalm be helpful to us when we are weak or ill.

Closing Prayer

Lord, thank You for Your presence with us. Thank You that You deliver us in times of trouble, that You protect and preserve us, that You bless us in the land, that You do not surrender us to the desire of our foes, that You sustain us on our sick bed or our moments of weakness. And that You restore us. Thank You, Lord, that You have mercy upon us. Thank You that You have never taken a position of being against us, but You are for us. As our Father, You are for us. “There is, therefore, now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1). The enemy accuses and the enemy condemns. Will Christ condemn or accuse us? You are for us. Lord, we

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pray for the strength in our heart to pray that we will repay those who turn against us—but repay them from the standpoint of mercy and grace rather than revenge and retaliation. Give us strength in our down moments. Give us fire in our life, Lord, that even when we physically can't get up and go, our heart and our spirit may remain strong and resilient. Give that as a gift of grace to us. Let not our enemy or our problems triumph over us, but hold us and set us in Your presence forever. We'll praise You, the God of Israel, the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from everlasting to everlasting. Amen.