

HELP FOR THE HELPLESS

PSALM 41

INTRODUCTION:

Most of you will be at least somewhat familiar with the organization called The Salvation Army—a ministry, of course, dedicated to helping the poor and needy in our society. It began some 155 years ago as a thoroughly evangelical Christian ministry, combining Gospel preaching with tireless and compassionate service to the helpless. It's founder, William Booth, noticed the church by and large content to sit in pews, sing their songs, and go about their business without seeming to care all that much about evangelism or showing mercy to those in need. Their excuse—"I am not called to do that." In response, Booth once said:

"'Not called!' did you say? 'Not heard the call,' I think you should say. Put your ear down to the Bible and hear Him bid you go and pull sinners out of the fire of sin. Put your ear down to the burdened, agonized heart of humanity, and listen to its pitiful wail for help. Go stand by the gates of hell and hear the damned entreat you to go to their father's house and bid their brothers and sisters and servants and masters not to come there. Then look Christ in the face—whose mercy you have professed to obey—and tell Him whether you will join heart and soul and body and circumstances in the march to publish His mercy to the world."

Psalm 41 presses home the importance of showing mercy to others—giving help to the helpless. It is the Old Testament counterpart to the fifth Beatitude: *"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy"* (Matt.5:7).

David wrote Psalm 41 at another difficult time in his life. He is not running from Saul or Absalom. He is not being hunted by Philistines. He is not wallowing in the weight of international politics. He is sick. And by the way he talks, it seems that he is very sick, likely confined to his bed, and he may not make it. But, as he reveals, he is not just suffering physically; he is suffering deep emotional pain and anguish because of the words of his enemies, and even his supposed friends. He is a man in need, and those around him are not helping; they are hurting.

Here David teaches us, through the testimony of Scripture and the testimony of his own personal experience, why it is so important for us to show mercy to those in need—to help the helpless.

- A. We are to be merciful to others because God blesses the merciful. (v.1)
- B. We are to be merciful to others because God is merciful to us. (vv.4-10)
We are to be merciful to others because God delivers and delights in the merciful. (vv.2-3, 11-12)

EXPOSITION:

A. God blesses the merciful. (v.1)

There are three words in this opening line that we need to define and understand if we are going to interpret and apply this psalm properly.

1. Blessed

"Blessed (בֵּרַכְתִּים) are/is" is a phrase or formula that occurs about 25 times in the Psalms. It is how Psalm 1 begins, and so it is fitting that the last psalm of the first book of the Psalter begins the same

way. But what does it mean to be blessed by God? Does it mean that He gives you all you want and deserve? Does it just mean you have as much money and things as you want? That is what blessing is to the health and wealth preachers and many others in and outside the church.

This, however, is not a biblical definition of what it means to be blessed by God. Simply put, to be blessed by God is to be the object of God's favor, and as such, you are fully satisfied in Him. That means that you can be blessed not only in good circumstances, but also in hard and painful circumstances. Jesus said, *"Blessed are the poor in spirit"; "Blessed are those who mourn"; "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness"* (Matt.5:3-4, 10). Such people are the object of God's favor. He smiles upon them and promises they shall be comforted and inherit the kingdom of heaven.

2. Helpless

"Helpless" (לֵבֵל) is a word that can be translated in several different ways depending on the context. It can mean poor, destitute, physically weak, needy in any way, helpless in the sense that they cannot help themselves. In Psalm 41, the word seems to be used in a general way: "Blessed is he who considers those in any kind of need." Financial need, physical sickness, emotional distress, mental confusion, etc.

3. Consider

"Consider" (שָׁקַל) is an interesting word here. It is associated with the wisdom literature and has to do with having and applying an understanding, insight, or wisdom to a situation. So, in verse 1, David is not saying, "How blessed is he who feels sorry or feels compassion for those in need." We can feel compassion and try to help someone in need, but it's very easy to help people in the wrong way. We often assume we know what someone's or a group's needs are. We can have all the right intentions, but without wisdom and understanding, we can end up hurting someone more than helping them.

Example: Mission teams often go into a cross-cultural setting overseas with a genuine desire to help people in need. Unfortunately, many of these teams assume they know what the needs are without talking to the people first. They don't consider their needs or take the time to understand what those needs are, and all their help ends up wasting time or resources.

But we also need to think about this at an individual and local level. Right here in our local communities and within our own church, there are people who feel helpless, needy, weak.

We are to **"consider"** them. We are not merely to feel sorry for them, but to think wisely about how to help them, minister to them, and encourage them. Not everyone who is having a hard time needs the same thing. Perhaps they need someone to simply pray with them. Perhaps they need someone to talk to or someone to listen to them. Maybe they need discipling. We need wisdom and discernment to know what is needed. And sometimes, we simply just need to ask others what they need. Helping one another requires us to understand one another, and the effort to understand one another is rooted in our love for one another.

And when we act this way towards others, David says that God will bless us. This was not a principle that David made up, by the way. If we look at the rest of Scripture, we will see that this is actually a theological principle affirmed throughout the Bible. Those who help the helpless, who show mercy to the needy, are blessed of the Lord.

- **Deuteronomy 15:7-8, 10**—If there is a poor man with you, one of your brothers, in any of your towns in your land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart, nor close your hand from your poor brother; ⁸ but you shall freely open your hand to him, and shall generously lend him sufficient for his need in whatever he lacks.... ¹⁰ “You shall generously give to him, and your heart shall not be grieved when you give to him, because for this thing the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all your undertakings.
- **Proverbs 11:17**—The merciful man does himself good, but the cruel man does himself harm.
- **Proverbs 14:21**—He who despises his neighbor sins, but happy is he who is gracious to the poor.
- **Proverbs 19:17**—One who is gracious to a poor man lends to the LORD, and He will repay him for his good deed.
- **Matthew 5:7**—Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

Jesus is not saying that by showing mercy to others, we earn the mercy of God. That kind of thinking runs contrary to the rest of the Scriptures and the Gospel. He is saying that showing mercy to others is the very evidence that we have received God’s mercy.

It is the same thing with the blessing of God in Psalm 41. We don’t earn God’s blessing by helping the helpless. Rather, he who considers the helpless is the person who recognizes that God has considered them—that He has shown mercy to them. God’s favor, His blessing, is given to those who prove to belong to Him by acting the way He acts—helping the helpless.

- **Sinclair Ferguson**—“You will be to others precisely what you believe God has been to you.”

And how does God bless this kind of person?

- **Verse 1b**—the LORD will deliver him in a day of trouble.
- **Verse 2a**—the LORD will protect him and keep him alive.
- **Verse 2b**—he will be called blessed on the earth. That is, it will be evident that God is with him.
- **Verse 2c**—the LORD will not give him over to the desire, or will, of his foes. The LORD will not let his enemies have the ultimate victory over him.
- **Verse 3**—the LORD will sustain him upon his sickbed and restore him to health. [The literal reading of this text is actually that God will turn his bed in his sickness. Like a nurse changing the bedding of a patient, tenderly caring for them. God does this for the merciful.]

This is not the health and wealth Gospel. This is the confidence of David in the testimony of Scripture and the promises of God. This is the assurance given to those who show evidence that they have experienced God’s mercy by showing mercy to others. This is the assurance that, though we experience sickness and

pain and grief now, we know that God will tenderly care for us and will ultimately deliver us from this suffering, from all our enemies, and even from death itself, through His Son Jesus Christ.

So, we are to be merciful to others because God blesses those who are merciful.

B. God is merciful to us. (vv.4-10)

We often think of the needy, the helpless, the weak as “those poor other people”. But in the rest of this psalm, David shows us that all of us have been, currently are, and perhaps soon will be the helpless, the weak, the needy. He gives personal testimony of his weak, needy, and helpless estate as the king of Israel! If anyone isn’t needy or helpless, it’s a king, right? Wrong. We are all in the same boat—we are all needy from God’s perspective, and in the human perspective, at some point, we need others to be merciful to us.

1. His prayer for grace (vv.4, 10)

David was apparently physically suffering badly, probably from some kind of sickness that was potentially serious. And anyone who has been seriously ill can sympathize with him. And remember, they had almost no medicine to speak of—no real painkillers, no Tylenol, not even air conditioning to make him a little more comfortable. He was physically suffering from something, likely for a prolonged period of time. And so, he prayed for God to heal him (v.4) and to raise him up (v.10)—to restore him physically and positionally as king.

But notice that, in both prayers, he asked for something else first. He asked God to be gracious to him. Why did he pray this way? Because he knew that what he was asking from God was something that he did not deserve—because he was a sinner (v.4b). David knew to be true what the rest of the Bible proclaims, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom.3:23). And because of our sin, the only thing we deserve is death: “For the wages of sin is death” (Rom.6:23a). David understood this. He knew that no matter how many good, brave, and righteous things he did as a man and king, he could never pay the sin debt he owed. He knew and understood what we all need to know and understand: our only hope is in God’s grace, His undeserved favor, His divine mercy.

David cast himself on the mercy and grace of God to heal him of his sickness. God did not have to heal him; God was not obligated to heal him—because David was a sinner. And so, as a sinner in need of healing, his only hope was God’s grace and mercy.

And likewise, our only hope in sickness, in suffering, in any kind of hardship is God’s grace and mercy. It is appropriate to pray for healing or the relief of suffering (e.g., David, Hezekiah, Paul), but we must never demand it as if God was our own personal Genie. God always has a purpose in our suffering, and He has the right, the authority, and the wisdom to end it when He so chooses. And when He does end it, it is always an act of His grace and mercy.

2. His lament because of his enemies (vv.4-9)

Though David was physically suffering from sickness, that was not his main complaint. What was worse for David was that on top of his physical sickness (his helplessness, weakness), people were making things much, much worse. Instead of godly people considering his helplessness (v.1), and showing him mercy, the wicked see his weakness as an opportunity to slander him, and they hope for his total demise.

What did they say?

- They spoke evil. (v.5)

They saw their king sick, and they wanted him gone already. “Why can’t this sickness hurry up and kill him already?” But their evil didn’t stop there. They didn’t just want his life to end; they wanted “**his name**” to end (v.5b). They wanted all memory of King David to be lost. They longed for his total eradication from the earth.

- They spoke lies. (v.6)

Some of them even came to see David in his sickness, no doubt expressing great concern and empathy over his suffering—wishing him a “Get well soon.” But David knew they were lies. He knew that as soon as they left his room and went outside, they spread the slander that flowed from their hateful hearts.

- They spoke rumors. (vv.7-8)

David says they whispered together against him. While David was down and unable to defend himself, they plotted, schemed, and devised his hurt. They said, “*A wicked thing [lit. a thing of belial, a thing of ruin] is poured out upon him*” (v.8a). They spread rumors that David was suffering heavily because a wicked thing had been poured out upon him, presumably for his own sin. They said he would not make it; he would die because of his sin. They wanted to discredit David by using his sickness as proof that God disapproved of him and even cursed him.

Who were these enemies?

Don’t get the wrong idea here. The enemies David is talking about here are not foreign powers who are at war with Israel. These are not the rulers of the Philistines or the Moabites. Here, in David’s sickness, his enemies are other Israelites, people he knows, perhaps people who work in his administration, people who are even able to visit him in his sickness (v.6); even his close friend is among them (v.9).

It is bad enough when suffering is caused by those who are far away, whom you don’t know or see very often. There is something impersonal about that physical or social distance that lessens the pain. But when you are hurt by someone close to you, it’s different; it’s worse. A betrayal of trust is one of the most painful things that can happen to us.

And this is what David experienced. And this is what some of you have experienced. And perhaps the pain is still real. Perhaps that broken trust has affected your ability to trust others even now.

There was good news for David, and there is good news for you, because in the pain, God is merciful. God comforts in the pain. When enemies attack, God is strong. When trust is broken, God remains faithful. When others are merciless, God is merciful to all who have shown mercy to others.

C. God delivers and delights in the merciful. (vv.11-12)

David affirms and experiences this truth that God delivers and delights in the merciful. He took confidence in the fact that he was a man who had shown mercy to those in need, which was evidence that he was a true child of God. And he knew that God does not abandon His children. They may be sick, be slandered, be attacked, be betrayed by others, but they will never be abandoned by their God.

David experienced God's deliverance. Though his suffering was painful at the time, in the end, his enemies did not gain the victory. He was vindicated by God. God upheld him in his integrity. God vindicated His own name. And by this action, David knew that He indeed did belong to God; that God was pleased with him, and even delighted in him.

God delights in His children. Even though we sin and complain and are so often unpleasant people, God still delights in us.

- **Psalm 149:4**—For the LORD takes pleasure in His people; He will beautify the afflicted ones with salvation.

But how is it possible for this holy God against whom we have sinned countless times to delight in us? It is possible only through faith in the One who came and willingly stood in the place of us helpless, needy, poor sinners—Jesus Christ. God delights in us as we trust in Jesus, who willingly came to suffer abuse at the hands of us wicked people. Like His ancestor, King David, Jesus was slandered. They spoke evil of Him, the King of kings, desiring His death and that His name and His words be forgotten for all time. Like David, they told lies about Him. They said that He was a sinner. They said that He cast out demons by the power of the ruler of demons. They said that He was not their King, though He was and is King of all creation. Like David, they tried to discredit the Lord, proving that He was not favored by God, He was not the Son of God, the Savior, because God let Him be hung on a cross.

- **Matthew 27:40**—If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.
- **Matthew 27:42**—He saved others; He cannot save Himself. He is the King of Israel; let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe in Him. He trusts in God; let God rescue Him now, if He delights in Him; for He said, "I am the Son of God."

Even Jesus' own friend, Judas, betrayed Him. One who ate with Him, ministered with Him, and prayed with Him lifted his heel against Him. What David experienced as God's anointed king, so Jesus experienced ultimately as God's anointed One, the Messiah.

But God raised Jesus up and vindicated Him. And He ascended in victory and is seated at the right hand of the Father. And all who come to Him now by faith are united to Him forever—we are in Christ. And if we are in Christ, then the Father looks at us in Him and delights in us, takes pleasure in us.

APPLICATION:

Recognize God's mercy to you.

- **2 Corinthians 8:9**—For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich.

In response, be merciful to others.

- If we recognize how merciful God has been toward us in Christ, then there is no greater motivation for us to be merciful to others.
- Conversely, if we refuse to help the helpless and never show mercy to others, then we demonstrate that we have never known God's mercy in the first place.

If you know and have experienced the mercy of God. Then we can all join together and affirm the doxology that closes Book 1 of the Psalter.

- **Verse 13**—Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting.

Amen and Amen.

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