

Psalm 41 “A Song for the Last Supper”
Psalm 41
John 13

January 8, 2017

To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David.

Our final Psalm in our journey through book One of the Psalter is Psalm 41.
If you read it simply as an individual lament over sickness and trouble,
then you will struggle over how to sing it.
After all, few of us have enemies who would rejoice over our death.
And (hopefully) few of us are wishing that God would raise us up,
so that we can repay our enemies for their malicious betrayals!

If you read Psalm 41 as a generic individual lament,
then Psalm 41 is a mean and nasty song that Christians simply shouldn't sing.

But here is the problem.

Jesus said that Psalm 41 is about himself and Judas.
That line about “my close friend in whom I trusted,
who ate my bread, has lifted his heel against me” –
Jesus says in John 13 that this scripture was fulfilled by Judas.

But that's why Psalm 41 has the title that it does:
“To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David.”

This song should be sung in corporate worship;
and this song should be sung in the voice of David.

David faced betrayal more than once.

If we are supposed to sing this song in the voice of David,
then the “close friend in whom I trusted” of verse 9 must be Ahithophel.
Ahithophel was the grandfather of Bathsheba.
He was a close friend and trusted advisor of David
who was legendary for his wise counsel.
2 Samuel 16:23 says that “in those days the counsel that Ahithophel gave
was as if one consulted the word of God;
so was all the counsel of Ahithophel esteemed, both by David and by Absalom.”

So when Absalom rebelled against David,
he first won over Ahithophel –
knowing that this would hurt his father more than anything else.
It is interesting to read the story of David's flight from Jerusalem
in the light of the gospel account of Jesus' betrayal by Judas.

David left Jerusalem, crossing the brook Kidron (2 Sam 15:23),
going up the ascent of the Mt. of Olives (2 Sam 15:30) –
where he hears of the betrayal of Ahithophel.

In John 18, we are told that after Judas went out,
Jesus took his disciples across the Kidron,
and in Matthew's gospel, we are told that they went to the Mount of Olives.

In other words, Jesus is retracing the steps of David.
Jesus *knows* the story of David and Ahithophel.
He understands that he is called to become all that David failed to be.

And he understands that Psalm 41 is all about *him*.
That's why Jesus quotes Psalm 41,
with Judas in the role of Ahithophel.

So let us sing Psalm 41 – in the voice of David's greater son.

Sing Psalm 41
Read John 13

Joel pointed out very well last Sunday night
that John's gospel uses the language of light and darkness very intentionally.

It is no accident that after John tells us that Judas went out –
he adds, "And it was night."

This is your hour – when darkness reigns.
Darkness – betrayal – death.

That is where David is in Psalm 41.

1. "Blessed Is the One Who Considers the Poor" (v1-3)

The opening words of Psalm 41 make it clear that if you want God to help you –
if you want the LORD to deliver you from your troubles –
then you need to show the same kindness to those in need.

This is the same principle that Jesus teaches us in the Lord's prayer:
"forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."
Do not ask God to forgive you – if you are unwilling to forgive others.
Do not ask God for help – if you are unwilling to help others.

As Jesus put it in Matthew 6:14-15,
"If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you,

but if you do not forgive others their trespasses,
neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

You should treat others the way that you want God to treat you.
Or to put it another way,
you can expect God to treat you the way you treat others.

Yes, God is gracious – and he does not treat us as we deserve!
Therefore *that* is how we should treat others!

a. The LORD Delivers Him in the Day of Trouble (v1)

41 Blessed is the one who considers the poor!^[a]

In the day of trouble the LORD delivers him;

Psalm 41 opens with a blessing on the one who considers the poor.

Since this is a Psalm of David,

we should see the King at the center of this Psalm.

The King was *supposed* to take thought for the poor.

In Israel, the King is the defender of the weak and helpless.

Certainly all Israelites were supposed to “take thought” for the poor –

but the King is supposed to be all that Israel has failed to be,

so the King – the Son of David – is called the defender of the weak

As the ESV footnote points out, the word translated “poor” can also mean “weak.”

As we have often seen, scripture does not think of poverty

primarily in terms of lack of stuff –

but in lack of power.

The poor – the weak – the helpless –

are those who lack access to power and influence –

so, not surprisingly, they lack wealth.

But this also means that the solution to poverty

is not primarily found in giving people stuff,

but in giving them access to power and influence.

The way that you “consider the poor” – the way that you take thought for the weak –

is by showing concern for their situation –

getting to know them – learning about the issues they face –

and then helping *them* deal with their issues.

Sure, sometimes that takes money –

but money is not the solution, it is a tool towards the solution.

Since the LORD is our pattern in how to help the poor and weak –

notice how the LORD helps the King:

b. The LORD Protects Him from His Enemies (v2)

² *the LORD protects him and keeps him alive;
he is called blessed in the land;
you do not give him up to the will of his enemies.*

When the King – when the Son of David – does what the King is called to do,
then the LORD protects him and keeps him alive –
and he is called “blessed” in the land.

Here at the end of book One,
we are running into the language of the “blessed man” a lot –
echoes of the opening words of Book One – “Blessed is the man...”
David is claiming that he *is* the blessed man of Psalm 1.

In Psalm 1, the blessed man is the one who mediates on God’s law –
who delights in God’s law.

Last time in Psalm 40 we heard David say “I delight to do your will, O my God,
your law is within my heart.”

Now David reminds us that the blessed man is the one who considers the poor.
He is called blessed in the land.
And, of course, Psalm 41 will end by declaring that the LORD is blessed.

The beginning and the end of this Psalm
(indeed, the beginning and the end of Book One of the Psalter)
are brought together when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.
The eternally Blessed One considered the poor –
and he who was rich beyond all measure, for our sake, became poor.

Verse 3 speaks of the sickness of the Blessed One:

c. The LORD Sustains and Restores Him from Sickness (v3)

³ *The LORD sustains him on his sickbed;
in his illness you restore him to full health.*

Why does God sustain him?

Why does God restore him to full health?

Because he is the blessed One –

he is the one who has taken thought for the poor
and helped the weak and helpless.

The reason why God requires this of us

is because he himself is like this.
God cares for the poor and needy.
He helps the weak and the helpless.
So if you would live as the image and likeness of God,
then you must be like him.

And that's why we turn in verses 4-10 to focus on the particular situation –
“what about me?”

2. But What About Me? (v4-10)

a. I Have Sinned (v4)

⁴ *As for me, I said, “O LORD, be gracious to me;
heal me,^[c] for I have sinned against you!”*

What is Psalm 41 saying about the relationship between *sin* and *sickness*?

On the one hand, it would be wrong to say that sickness is *always* a result of your sin.
On the other hand, it would also be wrong to say that sickness is *never* a result of your sin

When we sin against God, we are living in a manner contrary to the world he made,
so we should not be surprised when sinful patterns result in sickness and misery.

James expresses the same idea when he says in James 5:14-16,

“Is anyone among you sick?

Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him,
anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.

And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick,
and the Lord will raise him up.

And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.

Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another,
that you may be healed.”

Notice the “if” – James does not assume that sickness comes from sin,
but *if it does*, then confessing sins to one another is an essential part of healing.

Let me repeat that:

confessing sins to one another is an essential part of healing.

You cannot divide your life into isolated compartments.

You cannot divorce your body from your soul (that's called death).

Body and soul are bound intimately together.

And the healing of body and soul are also bound intimately together
(that's called the resurrection!).

God created us to be whole – but when we are not rightly related to him (and to others)
then we are disintegrating.
We are falling apart!

Have you ever had a broken relationship gnaw at you?
It eats away at you –
it affects your soul, yes –
but it also affects your body!
The stresses of broken relationships will invariably affect your bodies as well.

That's why David says "heal me, for I have sinned against you."
My sin has brought this situation upon me.

Now, we saw earlier that Jesus is the singer of Psalm 41 –
but how does Jesus pray verse 4?

How does Jesus say "heal me, for I have sinned against you"?
Theodoret paraphrases this very well:
"I am the one who is poor, [Jesus says], who embraced voluntary poverty,
the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,
who makes my own the sufferings of human beings,
who though having committed no sin offers the prayer for human nature
as nature's firstfruits." (Theodoret 323)

Of course, *we* sing verse 4 because we are confessing the truth about ourselves.
We plead with God to heal us – because we *have* sinned against him.

"God will heal you if only you admit your wound." (Caesarius of Arles, 323)

We need to learn to say the same thing about ourselves that God says about us.
That's what it means to *confess*.
The word confess (whether in English, Latin, or Greek!)
means to *say with* someone else – to say *the same thing* as someone else.
When we confess our sins we are saying that God is right about us.

And that confession is essential for understanding verses 5-7 –
who is right?
God or my enemies?

b. My Enemies Desire the Worst for Me (v5-7)

⁵ *My enemies say of me in malice,*

"When will he die, and his name perish?"

⁶ *And when one comes to see me, he utters empty words,*

*while his heart gathers iniquity;
when he goes out, he tells it abroad.
7 All who hate me whisper together about me;
they imagine the worst for me.*

I can't say that I could *ever* pray verses 5-7 about myself personally.
I don't think that anyone has ever hoped for my death.
But when you remember that this is about the *king* – the Son of David –
it makes a lot more sense.
The enemies of God's Kingdom have always sought to destroy the King –
and they have always tried to overthrow the Kingdom of Christ.

We see this clearly in the life of our Lord Jesus –
but we continue to see this in the church as well.

As Augustine said:

“Our Lord Jesus Christ is enthroned in heaven,
but in us his members he is still struggling on earth...
For the devil stirred up persecution against the church to destroy the name of Christ...
The martyrs were killed so that Christ might suffer anew, not in himself but in his body...
The Christians multiplied and multiplied again,
and the expectations of their enemies who asked,
‘When will he die and his name perish?’ were not fulfilled.
But the same thing is still being said today...
Still they are asking,
‘When will he die and his name perish?’” (Augustine 324).

They were wrong about Jesus.
They were wrong about the church in the Roman Empire.
And they will always be wrong about the church – so long as the church clings to Jesus.

The name of Jesus will never perish
because he sits enthroned at the right hand of the Father forever!

But even he had to pass through suffering and misery and death.
That's why we come to Judas in verses 8-9:

c. Even My Trusted Friend Has Turned Against Me (v8-9)

⁸ *They say, “A deadly thing is poured out^{el} on him;
he will not rise again from where he lies.”*

⁹ *Even my close friend in whom I trusted,
who ate my bread, has lifted his heel against me.*

As we saw earlier,
it is likely that Ahithophel is in view here –
David's close friend.

And as Jesus approaches his hour
he sees the parallel between Ahithophel and Judas,
and he sees how Psalm 41 is fulfilled once more.

There is nothing quite like betrayal –
when someone you trusted turns against you.

We have all had people *fail* us –
we have all had people prove to be weak and untrustworthy –
and sometimes that *feels* like betrayal –
but verse 9 is talking about deliberate, hostile, intentional betrayal.

It's talking about Judas (and Ahithophel) –
people who knew exactly how much their treason would hurt –
and did it anyway.

I want you to think for a moment about Ahithophel and Judas.

Why did Ahithophel betray David?

Why did Judas betray Jesus?

We are never given a glimpse into their secret thoughts and motives –
but given what we know about human motivation –
given what we know about the way that we deceive ourselves,
it is likely that both of them thought that they were doing *good*.

Ahithophel (the grandfather of Bathsheba)

may have been upset at how David had murdered Bathsheba's husband, Uriah.

He may have been convinced that David no longer deserved the throne.

And since God's promise was for David's Son,

why not transfer his allegiance to David's son!

I will not try to speculate about Judas –

but when the serpent tempted Eve, he tempted her with a very subtle falsehood.

Most of what he said was *true*.

And what she *loved* about his statement was the *truth* in it –

she just overlooked the subtle falsehood.

That's what happens when we believe lies!

Initially, we don't love the *lie* – we love the truth that coats the lie –

but then we start playing with the lie as well,

deceiving ourselves into thinking that we are still loving the truth.

Judas could easily have deceived himself into thinking that he was honoring and serving God by betraying Jesus.

And that is why our Lord Jesus says in verse 10:

d. Lord, Have Mercy! (v10)

¹⁰ *But you, O LORD, be gracious to me,
and raise me up, that I may repay them!*

What did Jesus do when he was raised from the dead and seated at the right hand of God?
He repaid his enemies.

The King is called to bring justice for the weak and helpless.
By definition, this means bringing justice to bear *against* their oppressors.
You cannot bring justice for the oppressed
without breaking the arm of the oppressor!
Yes, we love it when the oppressor repents and follows Jesus!
We love telling the story of Saul of Tarsus – and how he became Paul the apostle.
But if he did not repent – if the Lord Jesus Christ had not destroyed him
on the road to Damascus –
then Jesus would have destroyed him another way!
Those who are hostile to the Kingdom of Christ
will either be destroyed by baptism into Christ's death –
or else they will be destroyed by the fire of God's wrath.

Vengeance belongs to the Lord.
Therefore, the Lord is the one who brings vengeance against his foes.
The reason why you and I should *not* take vengeance against those who wrong us,
is *not* because vengeance is inherently wrong.

Vengeance is right!
(That's why it belongs to the Lord – because he is the *one* who can be trusted
to get it right!)

I like the story told by the desert fathers
of a monk with an anger problem.
He was so furious with what another monk had done to him
that he went to his superior and told him that he could not put up with it anymore,
and so he was going to go “take him down” (to use more modern lingo).

His superior said,
“Yes, I see your point. Let us pray:
O Lord, we don't need you for this one,
We can take vengeance for ourselves.
Amen.”

At once, the monk realized his fault.
In a world without God, everyone becomes his own god.

Psalm 41 concludes with a prayer of confidence.

3. You Have Upheld Me Because of My Integrity (v11-12)

¹¹ *By this I know that you delight in me:
my enemy will not shout in triumph over me.*
¹² *But you have upheld me because of my integrity,
and set me in your presence forever.*

It may seem strange at first that we see in the same Psalm an admission of sin
and a declaration of integrity –
but that is the point of repentance.
“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins
and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

And if you have been cleansed of all unrighteousness,
then all that is left is integrity.

After all, think about Jesus.

How can Jesus sing this song in John 13?
Jesus says that verse 9 is about him.
And yet the same voice in verse 4 plainly confesses sin.

Jesus must sing this song in order for us to sing it.
Because it is only if Jesus takes our sin upon himself –
it is only if he who knew no sin becomes sin for us –
that we might become whole – that we might regain our integrity.

So in verse 4, *Jesus* confesses sin only because our sins were imputed to him –
just as in v12, *we* confess integrity only because Christ’s righteousness is imputed to us.

Apart from Jesus we have no integrity.
Apart from Jesus, we are disintegrating.
We are falling apart!
But because of the resurrection of Jesus,
we have been made whole again –
at least, by faith.

Our bodies have *not yet* been made whole again.
God has promised that he will set us in his presence forever.
And in the resurrection of Jesus he has *begun* this good work.

And he who has begun this good work in you
will bring it to completion in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I think this is why the editors of the Psalms
thought that Psalm 41 was such a good place to end Book One.

Book One ends with the Son of David sitting in the presence of God forever.
That is the way the Kingdom of God *should be*.
And in Jesus, that is now true – *forever*.

And so we declare the final blessing of Book One:

4. Final Blessing (v13)

¹³ *Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel,
from everlasting to everlasting!
Amen and Amen.*

In one sense, this is not just part of Psalm 41 –
this is the concluding benediction of the whole of Book One.
We started with the blessed man of Psalm 1.
But throughout the songs of Book One
we began to see that the blessed man of Psalm 1
can only be the Son of David –
but we also began to see that the Son of David
can only be the King of Glory – the LORD of Hosts.
It is only when the Blessed LORD, the God of Israel,
becomes the Blessed Man, the Son of David,
that *we* can rest secure in the steadfast love of God forever.

“O Lord, as you have raised your Son from death, so lift me from sin. Lift me, and I will repay them. In this I know that you suffered for me so that my eneies may not rejoice over me. You have not refused even to die for me. I feared you lying in the tomb, but since you have arisen my enemy will not rejoice over me. You have sustained me on account of my innocence. The church speaks in the apostles and prophets because the farmers and fishermen raised up by God, not the philosophers and teachers, have built the church that God has confirmed in his sight forever.”
(Arnobius the Younger, 325)