

# “Blessed Is the One Who Considers the Poor!”

## *An Analysis of Psalm 41*

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### Text (ESV)

<sup>1</sup> Blessed is the one who considers the poor!

In the day of trouble the LORD delivers him;

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> The LORD sustains him on his sickbed;

in his illness you restore him to full health.

<sup>4</sup> As for me, I said, “O LORD, be gracious to me;

heal me, for I have sinned against you!”

<sup>5</sup> My enemies say of me in malice,

“When will he die, and his name perish?”

<sup>6</sup> And when one comes to see me, he utters empty words,

while his heart gathers iniquity;

when he goes out, he tells it abroad.

<sup>7</sup> All who hate me whisper together about me;

they imagine the worst for me.

<sup>8</sup> They say, “A deadly thing is poured out on him;  
he will not rise again from where he lies.”

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

<sup>10</sup> But you, O LORD, be gracious to me,  
and raise me up, that I may repay them!

<sup>11</sup> By this I know that you delight in me:  
my enemy will not shout in triumph over me.

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

<sup>13</sup> Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel,  
from everlasting to everlasting!

Amen and Amen.

### Introduction

Today we’re going to study Psalm 41, a psalm that is attributed to David. In order to understand the text, we’re not merely going to look at the psalm, but we’ll also refer to other Davidic psalms as well as a historical passage from 2 Samuel. Our goal is to get inside the psalmist’s mind.

The basic message of Psalm 41 can be summarized as follows: ***The believer who reaches out to the poor will experience God’s mercy in spite of personal failure, physical illness, opposition from enemies, and betrayal by friends. Furthermore, God’s mercy will extend beyond the believer’s earthly life into eternity.***

Psalm 41 is difficult to classify in that it contains instruction (vv. 1-3), a personal testimony of prayer (vv. 4-10), and thanksgiving (vv. 11-12). Following Allen Ross, the psalm is viewed here as a thanksgiving (*Commentary* 876). The psalm concludes with a doxology (v. 13), closing out the first of five major sections of the book of Psalms.

## Analysis

### Instruction: The LORD Blesses Those Who Are Mindful of the Poor (vv. 1-3)

The psalm opens with what amounts to a beatitude: “Blessed is the one who considers the poor!” What does it mean to *consider* the poor? The underlying Hebrew verb has a wide range of meanings. In this context it probably means to pay thoughtful attention to the poor. A similar blessing appears in Proverbs 14:21: “Whoever despises his neighbor is a sinner, but blessed is he who is generous to the poor.”

The Scriptures are filled with teaching concerning the poor. Consider the following Old Testament texts:

- “You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor” (Lev. 19:15).
- “He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor” (1 Sam. 2:8).
- “Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked” (Psalms 82:3-4).
- “Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will repay him for his deed” (Prov. 19:17).
- “Do not rob the poor, because he is poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate, for the LORD will plead their cause and rob of life those who rob them” (Prov. 22:22-23).
- “When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst, I the LORD will answer them; I the God of Israel will not forsake them” (Isaiah 41:17).

Consider the teachings of the gospels—the poor widow who was praised for giving all she had; Lazarus’s faithfulness in contrast with the self-absorption of the rich man; and the exaltation of the poor in spirit versus the statement that a rich man can scarcely be saved.

It is altogether too easy for us to be inattentive to the poor—to take steps, like the priest and the Levite in the parable of the good Samaritan, to avoid contact with the needy victim. We tend to view poverty as something to be avoided at all costs, but Jesus reminds us that “one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions” (Luke 12:15). And even if we do show mercy to the poor, we may not recognize that as we serve them, we’re actually doing it to Christ (Matt. 25:34-40).

Strikingly, at least two New Testament authors insist that the legitimacy of our faith is shown by our treatment of the poor. James asks, “If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled,’ without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead” (James 2:15-17). John poses a similar question: “But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:17-18).

How is one blessed who is mindful of the poor? Psalm 41 speaks of six blessings:

- Deliverance in time of trouble (v. 1)
- Protection/preservation of life (v. 2)
- Public recognition of blessing (v. 2)
- Restraint of enemies' plans (v. 2)
- Strength in time of illness (v. 3)
- Recovery from illness (v. 3)

These are not absolute promises, but acknowledgments of ways that God tends to show his mercy to those who are faithful to him. We should not view God as some heavenly vending machine where we press a button to receive a particular response. But the fact stands that God retains some of his blessings for believers who are attentive to others who are in need. According to Ross, "The foundational thought [. . .] may be reiterated with the beatitude, 'Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy' (Matt. 5:7)" (*Commentary* 887).

Throughout the remainder of the chapter, David describes how he experienced God's deep mercy in a time of great need. As we look at this in detail, let us keep in mind that David saw his own deliverance as being connected to his attentiveness to others' needs.

### **Prayer: The Psalmist Cries out for the LORD's Mercy (vv. 4-10)**

In this section, David prays to the LORD, and his prayer describes in some detail the predicament he faced. He had sinned against God (v. 4). He was physically sick—enough so that his survival was in question (vv. 4-5, 8). He was surrounded by enemies, some of whom pretended to care but were actually celebrating his presumed demise (vv. 5-8). But the circumstance that likely troubled him the most was the fact that a close friend had betrayed him (v. 9).

It is not possible to pinpoint a time in David's life when he faced all of these challenges simultaneously. The psalm's reference to a friend's betrayal calls to mind the treachery of Ahithophel (Ross, "Psalms" 825; Spurgeon 337), who aligned himself with David's son Absalom when he sought to steal the kingdom from David (2 Sam. 15-17). The problem with affirming that David wrote the psalm in reference to this situation is that there is no historical record of him having been sick at this time—or, for that matter, at any time (Ross, *Commentary* 877).

This section of the psalm begins and ends with an appeal for mercy. Verse 4 emphasizes the presence of sin and the need for healing. David frankly acknowledged his sin, understanding that he needed spiritual restoration as much as bodily healing. Though he was a righteous man, he made no claim to be perfect. Verse 10 stresses David's desire to be raised up and to see his enemies and traitors receive their due.

David used similar language when calling out for healing in Psalm 6:2-4: "Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am languishing; heal me, O LORD, for my bones are troubled. My soul also is greatly troubled. But you, O LORD—how long? Turn, O LORD, deliver my life; save me for the sake of your steadfast love."

Psalm 41 is not the only Davidic psalm containing a betrayal theme. It is also found in Psalm 55:12-14, 20-21:

For it is not an enemy who taunts me—then I could bear it; it is not an adversary who deals insolently with me—then I could hide from him. But it is you, a man, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend. We used to take sweet counsel together; within God’s house we walked in the throng.

[. . .]

My companion stretched out his hand against his friends; he violated his covenant. His speech was smooth as butter, yet war was in his heart; his words were softer than oil, yet they were drawn swords.

Clearly, the betrayal of a friend weighed heavily on David’s heart. It is significant that Jesus quoted from Psalm 41:9 when predicting his betrayal by Judas Iscariot (John 13:18).

### **Thanksgiving: The Psalmist Acknowledges the LORD’s Favor (vv. 11-12)**

The first three verses of the psalm announced the blessings that rest on those who are mindful of the poor. David found himself in need of all six blessings, and he called out fervently to the LORD. In verses 11 and 12, he praises God for answering his prayer. Evidently, David was a man of godly character in his disposition toward those in need.

As noted earlier, Psalm 41 may have Absalom’s uprising as its historical backdrop. During the uprising, David found it necessary to seek a safe haven outside of Jerusalem. According to 2 Samuel 15:25, when he escaped the city, he was unsure of God’s favor toward him: “If I find favor in the eyes of the Lord, he will bring me back and let me see both it and his dwelling place.” By contrast, in the thanksgiving section of Psalm 41, he proclaims confidently, “I know that you delight in me” (v. 11). Whether because time has passed or he has received an affirming word from God, David has a different outlook on his situation. He is assured that God has granted him to be forever in his presence (v. 12), calling to mind the words of Psalm 23:6: “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.”

In verse 12 David points to his integrity as the basis for his deliverance. He is certainly not pretending to be sinless (cf. v. 4), nor is he claiming that God has acted out of debt rather than mercy (cf. vv. 4, 10). Nevertheless, he has demonstrated godliness in multiple ways: He has shown concern for the poor (implied by the whole psalm), he has sought forgiveness for his sins, and he has called out to God in time of trouble. These are all marks of a person of integrity. Ross explains that

The mention of his integrity as a reason for the LORD’s deliverance is not out of harmony with his earlier acknowledgment of sin. Being a sinner does not mean that God was not pleased with him; God was pleased with him because he confessed his sin and appealed for mercy. The fact that he acknowledged his sin is evidence that he was trying to live according to the precepts and provisions of the LORD. (*Commentary* 886)

David’s appeal to his integrity in Psalm 41 is not unique. It has a parallel in Psalm 26:1: “Vindicate me, O LORD, for I have walked in my integrity, and I have trusted in the LORD without wavering.”

## Doxology: The LORD Is Worthy of Eternal Praise (v. 13)

Verse 13 is the first of 5 doxologies that appear at the end of each of five “books” that make up the overall book of Psalms. The other doxologies appear in 72:18-19; 89:52; 106:48; and 150:6. The first four doxologies are remarkably similar:

- Each begins with “Blessed be the LORD.” Three of the four further identify the LORD as “the God of Israel.”
- Each refers to the LORD’s enduring worth (“from everlasting to everlasting” or “forever”).
- Each concludes with a single or dual “Amen.”

According to Charles Spurgeon, here in the doxology, “God’s blessing at the beginning is now returned from the mouth of His servant” (339). As the congregation of the faithful adds its “Amen,” we all glorify God for his mercy.

## Practical Lessons

- God intends for us to be mindful of the poor and to meet their needs as we’re able to do so.
- A variety of blessings await those who are considerate of the poor.
- Whatever trials we may face, we can rest in the fact that no circumstance escapes God’s sovereign control, his inscrutable wisdom, and his tender love.
- As God’s children, no matter our earthly circumstances, we’re forever blessed and privileged to enjoy his presence.
- Failure is not final. The proper response to sin is confession, which leads to a restoration of fellowship.
- The proper response to God’s mercy in our lives is for us to bless him forever.

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