

Horsley Evangelical Church (www.horsleyec.org.uk)

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Psalm 41 The God of all compassion

Reading Psalm 41 brings us to the end of the first book of Psalms. There are a total of 150 Psalms in the Bible as you will know, which are divided up into five books, and today we reach the end of the first book. The Biblical Psalms were collected and arranged in this way after the people of Israel returned from Babylon and exile in the fifth century BC. And we believe that this arrangement into books, like each individual Psalm, is inspired of God.

After the first two Psalms of introduction, we have in book 1 a collection of 39 sacred songs all composed by David. And in many of them, we are aware of David's struggles. But the first book ends, as does each of the five books of Psalms, with the praise of the Lord. So, verse 13. **Read verse 13.** David has shared with us many personal times of difficulty in the first book of Psalms, but the Lord is to be praised for his help, mercy and goodness to David through his trials.

Now we shall see in this final Psalm of book 1 echoes of the opening two Psalms concerning *the blessing of the Lord* and *the protection of the Lord* over his people. We'll treat verse 13 separately, but look at verses 1-12 under three headings. The first, in verses 1-3, is **David's affirmation**. David is telling us in these verses something he knows to be true. And he *affirms* these things to us so that we might know them too and be blessed in our life. **Read verses 1-3.**

Who are 'the weak' in verse 1? The weak are those who are easily taken advantage of by others. They include the foreigner or alien in the land. The weak may be the fatherless or the widow, the poor, or those with little standing in society. Or else the weak may be those who are ill or physically frail. In verse 3 David seems to be thinking of those who are ill and confined to bed.

But the affirmation David makes to us is that he who has regard for the weak is blessed. We've noted before that this word 'blessed' means 'happy' or 'fortunate'. How happy and fortunate are those who have a regard for the weak. Those who show consideration, mercy and compassion for the vulnerable are in a privileged position.

This opening statement reminds us of the opening statement in the first Psalm in book 1. **Read Psalm 1:1, 2.** How happy and fortunate is the man who delights in God's law and obeys it. And this is very similar to the opening verse of our Psalm today. How happy and fortunate is the man who has regard for the weak. For of course God's law commanded that the disadvantaged should be shown such regard and consideration. One example of this is found in the book of Deuteronomy. **Read Deuteronomy 15:7-11.** So David is telling us, "Blessed is the person who keeps the law of God in general and this law regarding the weak in particular."

But why is such a person *blessed*? Why are they *fortunate*? There are two main reasons. The first is that such action shows that the person belongs to the Lord and his people. God himself has regard for the weak. The Lord our God is full of mercy and compassion towards the vulnerable. And his people will be like this too. They will show a certain family likeness

in this respect. Therefore, blessed are you if you show regard for the weak, for this indicates that you belong to God and are one of his covenant people. And if you belong to God and are one of his children you are one of the most fortunate people in the whole world!

But there is a second reason, and it is this reason that David reminds us of in the Psalm. The second reason why you are blessed and fortunate if you have regard for the weak *is that the Lord will have regard for you*. To some extent we are all weak before the Lord. As Psalm 39 reminded us, we are but ‘a breath’. We are all weak and frail and vulnerable – more so than we think! But the good news is that the Lord will have regard for you. The Lord will have mercy on you. And if you show kindness to someone who is even weaker than you. If you show kindness to the poor, the alien, the widow, the fatherless and the sick, then the Lord will remember your kindness and treat you as you have treated others when you are in a weakened state. The Lord will remember what you have done. Your action will please the Lord and he will reward you.

So if *you* are ever in trouble – the Lord will deliver *you* in times of trouble (1). If *your* life is in danger, the Lord will protect and preserve *your* life (2). **Read verse 2b, 3**. And the New Testament reminds us of this same command to show mercy to others, and then the blessing that come from it. Jesus said, “Blessed are the merciful for they shall be shown mercy” (Matthew 5:7). Also, **read James 1:27**.

The Psalm opens then by reminding us of the blessings of belonging to God, the blessings of obeying his word. But we are also reminded of the blessing of being remembered by God when we are in a difficult and weak position. God will keep us, help us and care for us. We shall not be forgotten by The Lord. Indeed, the New Testament assures us that God will work all things together for the good of those who love him (Romans 8:28). This is **David’s affirmation**.

Then secondly in verses 4-10, we read of **David’s lament**. This lament begins and ends with David asking the Lord for mercy. **Read verses 4a and 10a**. But as we read through the words of the lament, we realise that in fact *David is weak* because he is ill. So the words concerning *weakness* in verses 1-3 are not just random, but are prompted by David’s own condition. He is in a position of weakness. But David has not found those who have had *regard for him* in his weakness. Quite the opposite in fact. He has found that certain people have only tried to take advantage of his vulnerable position. Indeed such people wanted to destroy him.

But in so doing, they will not know the blessing of the Lord. **Read verse 4-10**. Verse 4 implies that David’s sin has caused his illness. We are not told what this sin is, but it links Psalms 38-41 together because in all of these Psalms the Lord is rebuking and disciplining his servant David because of some sin David has committed. And this must have made the actions of these enemies all the more difficult for David to bear.

Verse 5 indicates that they wished David were dead. **Read verse 5**. But more than that, they wished that when David is dead his memory might be lost – *his name might perish*. And this was a very serious thing to wish on anyone, as it was considered a curse from God.

Verse 6 speaks about these enemies visiting David when he is ill. They pretend to come as friends, bringing the flowers and grapes to the ill patient. They speak kindly to David. But in fact they only visit to gather information and then go out and misrepresent David to others.

Read verse 6. This may be a similar situation to the one David faced in Psalm 39 where he describes an occasion when he decided to put a muzzle on his mouth as long as the wicked are in his presence, for David knows the wicked will use his words to make mischief for their own evil purposes.

And now here in Psalm 41, these enemies spread the rumour that David will never recover from his illness and they imply that David's sin is so great that the Lord will take his life. **Read verse 7, 8.** But particularly painful to David was the betrayal of a close friend at that time. **Read verse 9.** People wonder if this might refer to David's counsellor, Ahithophel, who, during the conspiracy of Absalom, betrayed David and joined the rebellion.

We don't know for sure who David means. But such was their friendship that David describes this person as a close friend who 'shared my bread'. It implies that this person ate regularly at David's table, that he was someone David invited into his house and knew very well. But this close friend lifted up his heel against David when he was weak and repaid David's kindness and friendship with hatred and betrayal.

This was a verse which the Lord Jesus quotes in John 13:18 referring to the betrayal of Judas Iscariot at the last supper. And it makes us realise that our Lord knew the Psalms very well and knew that they contained a prophetic element. The Lord Jesus knew that what had happened to David in his kingship actually pointed forward to what would happen to him. These things were written for his, Christ's, learning - and in one sense his comfort.

But the lament finishes with David again asking for the Lord's mercy. **Read verse 10 again.** We are not to interpret this as David longing for personal revenge, so much as David acting as the king and dealing with these enemies who had set themselves against the Lord's anointed and against his kingdom.

And if verse 9 points us forward to the *sufferings of Jesus* when he was betrayed to death, then verse 10 points us forward to the judgement given by Jesus at his glorious return, when all of God's enemies shall receive what their evil deeds deserve.

But more generally, verses 4-10 remind the righteous that there will be times in our lives when *we can expect the hatred and opposition of others*, even close friends (just as verses 1-3 remind us that *we can expect to know times of weakness* in this life. And yet we will know the mercy and compassion of God.

When his people are weak, they will know the Lord's help - even when that weakness is caused by the Lord's discipline. And when his people are opposed, they will again know the help of their God. For the Lord will not abandon his people. He will remain faithful. "Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you." So **David's affirmation** and then **David's lament**.

But then in verses 11, 12 we have **David's confidence**. **Read verses 11, 12.** Some see this as David's confidence that the Lord *will* yet deliver him from his illness and his enemies. Others think that David writes this *after* the Lord has already made him well and *after* the Lord has delivered him from his enemies.

It's difficult to say which is right. But David certainly knows the Lord's pleasure in him and the Lord's strengthening of him. And by faith David knows the Lord shall protect him from the enemies, for the Lord has established David's position as the king.

And the words of verse 12 imply that David knows he will be in the Lord's presence forever. This in turn makes us think back to Psalm 16. **Read Psalm 16:11**. David knows, and every believer can know our security is in God eternally.

And again we hear echoes of the introduction of this first book of Psalms. In Psalm 2, the Lord's enemies take their stand against his anointed, just as they do in Psalm 41. But like this Psalm, Psalm 2 speaks about the Lord's anointed being kept and established. **Read Psalm 2:4-9**.

And so these words of confidence at the beginning and the end of the first Book of Psalms must have been a great encouragement to our Lord Jesus as he faced the cross. The Father was pleased with his Son and would not let his enemies triumph over his Son. The Father would uphold his Son, deliver his Son and would bring him into his immediate presence for ever.

So we have the **affirmation of David**, the **lament of David** and the **confidence of David**. But then we come to the final verse. **Read verse 13**. Most people understand verse 13 *not* to be the words of David but of a later editor who has collected the Psalms together. And I think that's fair. You will find similar *doxologies* at the end of each of the five books of Psalms.

And each one has this same call to *praise the Lord*. Now, we believe verse 13 to be inspired of God just like the main body of the Psalm. And it's a call for us to respond, to not only this Psalm but to all the Psalms in book 1. And the call is for us to praise the Lord. **Read verse 13**.

In this first book of Psalms we have often thought about the struggles of David, but we see how he turns to the Lord and pours out his heart and knows God's help. We have thought much about the character of the Lord that these Psalms reveal – his purity, power, wisdom and grace. And we have seen his help given to the weak – much of the time it's David who is weak! But the Lord has been gracious to David and has helped, strengthened and encouraged his servant.

And now at the end of the book, we are all called to respond to this. And the call is to praise him, the God of Israel. We have seen something of the Lord's goodness - and now we are called to praise him. This is the fitting and appropriate response of any person. And it's this same response that is called for at the end of all the books of Psalms. At the end of verse 13 are the words, "Amen and Amen" which means, "Yes, may it be so. Yes, I am in agreement with this. Yes, I'm going to do this."

The purpose of reading the Psalms or any of the Bible is not simply for interest's sake or entertainment's sake. These things have been revealed to us so that we may know the Lord and learn to worship him. These things are given so that we may seek God's face and honour him in our lives, that we may serve him who is the King of kings and look forward to living in his presence for ever.

And so the great application at the end of these 41 Psalms is to praise and worship the Lord. What we have read of David's struggles can be applied to ourselves - we all struggle. But like David, we will know the help of the Lord. We too can draw near to the Lord and grow in our spiritual understanding. But ultimately the response is to praise him. We are here to worship him. That is the main business of life and the reason we have been created.