

# Before the Face of God

A Sermon on Psalm 41

by

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## 1. Introduction

## 2. The Lord Shows Mercy to the Merciful (vv. 1-3).

*a. The blessed man is the one who shows mercy to the helpless (v. 1).*

- i. David begins this Psalm by teaching principles of basic, proverbial wisdom: “How blessed is he who considers the helpless; the Lord will deliver him in a day of trouble.”
  1. This is much like the statement we find from Christ in the Beatitudes, where he says, “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy” (Matt. 5:7).
  2. The idea is not purely transactional, meaning it is not a “tit for tat” type of relationship between showing mercy to the helpless and receiving mercy yourself.
- ii. Yet there is undoubtedly a principle of wisdom here, where one motivation for you to show mercy is that you will receive it in your time of need.
  1. The assumption built into v. 1 is that the one who considers the helpless will one day be in a position of weakness himself.
    - a. The idea is not that they simply have some passing thoughts to those who are helpless, but that they actually meet their needs.
    - b. On the opposite end of this is the reality that we too will one day face hardship, uncertainty, and suffering.
  2. The instruction of wisdom teaches that those who have been merciful will receive mercy from the Lord in their time of need.

- a. The word that David uses here for “trouble” is the Hebrew term for “evil.”
- b. Yet notice that when the day of evil comes, the Lord will deliver those who have shown mercy.

b. *This blessed, merciful man is utterly safe in the arms of his Lord (vv. 2-3).*

- i. David lists three ways that the merciful will be shown mercy by God in days of evil.
  1. The first: “The Lord will protect him and keep him alive, and he shall be called blessed upon the earth” (v. 2a).
    - a. The point that David makes here is simply that when evil comes upon the merciful, they will not be overtaken by it.
    - b. Instead, just the opposite will be the case for them. In the midst of the evil days, all who look upon them will actually call them blessed.
  2. Secondly, the Lord will not give them over to the desire of their enemies (v. 2b).
  3. Thirdly, he says, “The Lord will sustain him upon his sickbed; in his illness, You restore him to health” (v. 3)
    - a. The picture that David gives us here is that the Lord actually takes the sickbed and transforms it into a place of healing.
    - b. The very thing that would be cause for despair becomes the thing of hope.
- ii. It is important for us to remember though that this first section is proverbial wisdom, which gives us general principles that are true.
  1. It does not mean that the merciful will never face harm, nor that we shall escape death.
    - a. And yet the wonderfully true paradox of mercy remains.

- b. We have the benefit of knowing that even if all fails in this life, God will not fail to bring us to the next.
2. Yet just as dear to us is the fact that the merciful will be given sufficient grace and mercy in the midst of evil days.
  - a. Though we may face innumerable hardships, we will remain blessed by God.
  - b. Though we may face enemies on every side, we will remain safe and secure in God's grasp.
  - c. Though our bodies may fail, the Lord will be our physician, in this life and the next.
3. What this section teaches us is a theology of suffering, which is perhaps one of the hardest doctrines for us to wrap our minds around.

### **3. The Lord Rescues the Afflicted from Every Foe (vv. 4-10).**

*a. David recounts the mercy of God in forgiving his sins (v. 4).*

- i. In this section, David is looking back to a time where he saw the Lord's mercy to him firsthand.
  1. Notice how he says in v. 4, using the past tense, "As for me, I said, 'O Lord, be gracious to me; heal my soul, for I have sinned against You.'"
  2. We can also safely assume from v. 3 that David is once again speaking of the sickness that was brought upon him due to his sin.
- ii. Notice that David's prayer contained two requests as he sat upon his sickbed.
  1. He asked for the Lord to be gracious to him, and to heal him.
    - a. While David undoubtedly desired to be healed of his sickness, the reason he cried out to God is that his soul was not well.

- b. He knew that his sin was the cause of his sickness, so his prayer was informed by his desire to be free from the root cause of his sufferings.
  2. A simple way to understand this is that David knew that even if his body was healed, yet his soul was not, all is not well.
- b. *David makes a new plea for God's mercy in the midst of mutiny (vv. 5-10).*
  - i. "My enemies speak evil against me, 'When will he die, and his name perish?' And when he comes to see me, he speaks falsehood; his heart gathers wickedness to itself; when he goes outside, he tells it. All who hate me whisper together against me; against me they devise my hurt, saying, 'A wicked thing is poured out upon him, that when he lies down, he will not rise up again.' Even my close friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted up his heel against me."
    1. David's situation has gone from bad to worse. He is not merely sick; he has people rising to the occasion, waiting to see him die.
      - a. These men are those he had known for years—they were advisors, brothers at arms, and fellow Israelites.
      - b. But they were more than traitors waiting for him to die; they want his very name to fade from existence.
    2. Notice how close to David these men truly were. In verse 6, David speaks of a man who comes in to visit him on his sickbed.
      - a. When this man comes in, he speaks nothing but falsehood while his heart gathers more and more wickedness to itself.
      - b. In vv. 6-7, we see this same man gather others around him who hate the king to devise David's harm.

3. The worst betrayal of all: even David's close friend, whom he trusted, whom he shared countless meals with, has lifted his heel against him.
  - a. The word David uses here to describe just how close this man was to him, is "shalom," which means "peace."
  - b. This would be the worst betrayal recorded for us in Scripture if it didn't also speak to Another who was betrayed (John 13:18-30).
- ii. David is on the cusp of death—not merely from illness, but from the hand of his enemies, and so he asks God to deliver him.
  1. Yet David's plea here is not one of faint hope. He prays in v. 10, "But you, O Lord, be gracious to me and raise me up, that I may repay them."
    - a. He knows the merciful is granted mercy—and he has been a good king, despite what slanderous lies his enemies have spread.
    - b. He knows the Lord has forgiven him for his sin and has healed his soul—and so he expectantly waits for the Lord to show him mercy once again.
  2. What might not settle well with you is that David's motivation in asking the Lord to heal him is that he desires to repay them.
    - a. Remember, David is the king. He has every right to appeal to the Law and wield the sword against those who are plotting against him.
    - b. His desire is not to take vengeance, but to expose their treachery and lies to the whole of Israel.
      - i. David knows, in other words, that if the Lord is pleased to restore him, he can pursue every lawful action against these men—and even this is the mercy of God on display

- ii. It is always right, therefore, to pursue justice—trusting that even if the outcome proves unfavorable in this life, the Lord will ensure justice is meted out in the next.

#### **4. The Lord Upholds the Blameless in their Integrity (vv. 11-12).**

*a. David's confidence lay in seeing the Lord currently protecting him from harm (v. 11).*

- i. Anyone in David's condition would be left to wonder if the Lord truly cared for him, but as we see in this verse, David's confidence is actually strengthened.
  - 1. Even though he is still upon his sickbed, he knows that God has not forsaken him, despite what his enemies proudly shout in the streets.
  - 2. The reason for this is incredibly simple: he is not yet dead (v. 11).
- ii. David likewise knows he has lived by the standard of mercy, and therefore he sees the merciful hand of his Father upon him even in the midst of the most trying circumstances.
  - 1. He is still waiting to see the Lord grant his request to be healed and restored so he can execute justice, but he is at peace.
    - a. His enemies have not gained the victory they so desperately desire.
    - b. Whatever the outcome may be, he knows it is in God's hands and that God will act justly.
  - 2. And yet David does not merely look to his immediate circumstances to see the gracious provision of the Lord.
    - a. David is able to confirm that he is safe and secure in the arms of his Lord now, but this moves him to see that he is safe to the uttermost.
    - b. In other words, David knows in his heart of hearts that even if he is not restored and able to pursue justice, the Lord will still have mercy on him.

b. *David's confidence lay in the Lord's nearness to him both now and forever (v. 12).*

i. "As for me, You uphold me in my integrity, and you set me in Your presence forever."

1. David knows that the Lord is not shocked to find traitors in his midst, yet he also knows that God sees his integrity, or purity, and upholds him in it.

a. What he's describing here is simply that God has already vindicated David in one sense.

b. God has seen His servant abide in faithfulness and mercy all the days of his life.

2. God has taken David and set him in His presence forever.

a. The Hebrew would literally be expressed, "You have placed me before Your face eternally."

b. The phrase has in mind a sense of timelessness, where David stands bare before his Maker. Whatever David has done, is doing, and will do, is forever before the face of God.

ii. David ends this Psalm on a note of tension. He does not record for us that he was delivered from his sickness, nor even from his enemies.

1. We know from Scripture that this is not how David dies—but that tension remains in this Psalm for a reason.

2. The purpose in leaving this Psalm with that tension is to move God's people to worship.

a. David is smart enough to know that God's people will always endure some sort of suffering in this life.

b. The guarantee is safety in the grasp of God Himself—not that we will never face harm in this life.

- c. Yet the wonderfully beautiful reality is that we live “before the face of God” *eternally*. No earthly trial or suffering can snatch us from this place.
- d. In light of this, David writes a simple doxology, “Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Amen and amen.”

## 5. Conclusion

### Small Group Questions

1. Knowing that God’s mercy is truly beyond the reach of time and space, how does this bring you hope in the midst of evil days?
2. Knowing that we live “before the face of God” eternally, how does this spur you on the holiness and works of mercy?
3. How does living in the tension between suffering and hope lead us to praise God?