

Prayer

We thank You Lord God for sleep and for rest. You have given us a Sabbath rest in which to honour You, and You have made our bodies so that they need rest each day in the form of sleep. May we not abuse either of these two great gifts but use them as they are intended; for our benefit and for Your glory; AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: The food we eat

Pray today about the issue of packaging. Much of the food we buy is packaged in a way that produces an enormous quantity of waste. The results of this are found littering the roadsides of many countries and filling vast landfill waste sites throughout the world. Pray that good people within the industry will work to find better ways of distributing and selling food.

Meditation

We live in an extraordinary world, where there are people who:

Use their positions of advantage for personal gain at the expense of others;

Prey upon the weak and use them without respect for their dignity or humanity;

Use violence and intimidation to achieve their will and keep others in subjection;

Work in the public service but do not accept the proper accountability of their office;

Use money to influence political processes for financial gain, at the expense of others;

But there are also very good people who because of their faith in Jesus,

Identify with the poor and work for the justice and freedom of all God's people;

Offer themselves selflessly in public service, and will not stand for any corruption;

Strive for truth in all its forms, spiritually, intellectually and compassionately;

Use peaceful means to promote the good of all people and respect for true Faith;

Bring justice to our world through patient adherence to Your timeless Word.

Give us a heart to see the good in this world and identify with it personally.

Bible Study - Psalm 41

For the director of music.

A psalm of David.

¹ *Blessed are those who are concerned for the helpless;*

the LORD delivers them when in trouble.

² *The LORD protects them and keeps them alive, He will bless them in the land and not give them over to their enemies' intent.*

³ *The LORD will sustain them when they are laid low with illness and restore them to full health.*

⁴ *As for me, I prayed, 'LORD, have mercy on me; heal me, for I have sinned against you.'*

⁵ *My enemies spoke only evil of me, 'When will he die and his name expire?'*

⁶ *When they came to see me they spoke falsely, whilst gathering slander in their hearts*

in order to go out and spread it around.

⁷ *All who hated me whispered together about me, and they plotted evil against me;*

⁸ *'A devilish thing has come on him, and he will never rise from where he lies.'*

⁹ *Even my good friend, whom I trusted and who shared my food, has sought to strike me down.*

¹⁰ *But You, O LORD, have had mercy on me; and raised me up so that I may repay them.*

¹¹ *I know from this that You are pleased with me, for my enemy no longer defeats me.*

¹² *As for me, You have held me secure in my integrity and placed me in Your presence for ever.*

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

Amen and Amen.

Review

Psalm 41 is the last psalm of the first 'Book' of the Psalms. In your Bibles, you will notice that just before Psalm 42 there is a heading which reads 'Book 2'. Such headings occur before psalms 1,42,73,90,and 107 making a total of five 'books' of Psalms in the Bible. These headings are part of the ancient Hebrew text of Scripture, and may well indicate that the collection we have in the Bible today came from a number of different scrolls that were kept in the Jerusalem Temple (and possibly in other places before that). Many of the headings you read in the Bible are modern editorial aids, and even the chapter and verse structure of the Bible is an aid which was added hundreds of years after it was written, so it is important to know what words are part of the sacred text, and what are not!

Our psalm today is fascinating because it deals with the subject of healing. It begins by telling of the Lord's blessing of healing given to those who are righteous and who are 'concerned for the helpless' (41:1). It looks as if the Lord is rewarding people for doing good, and some would say that this is unfair. However, as Jesus pointed out on a number of occasions, who are we to pronounce on the fairness of God's abundant generosity? (see the parable of the labourers in the vineyard, Matt 20:1-6 or the wedding banquet, Luke 14:15-24).

What the psalm does is point us towards what is truly unfair on those who are ill, which is the breakdown of normal social relationships and friendships that can occur during illness; and this is the subject of the central section (40:4-9). Many of us may not have experience of such trouble because our Christian community or our family helps us at such times with love and compassion. That is not true, however, within the world at large. I read in the newspapers only today about someone who was ill at home, barely able to move, and dependent upon oxygen. She was unable to do the normal things of life including dealing with financial obligations on time. After a few days of her electricity bill being unpaid and with no prior legal notice, a workman cut off her electricity despite the pleas of her son. Her life-giving medical equipment stopped, and although an ambulance was called, her brain was starved of oxygen and a day later she died; and the power company involved denied all responsibility. This is an extreme example, but trouble and stress are certainly compounded by illness. This is a recent story, but in ancient times, illness was seen as a sign of weakness and even as God's curse. People did gather, waiting for people to die, so that they could lay hands on their land or possessions. There is no doubt that spiritually, enemies wait to pounce on weakness, for that is how evil works, and sickness has always been a weakness, whatever its origins in sin or the world in general. Weakness in sickness is the theme of the whole psalm.

It is no co-incidence that the first verse says 'blessed are those who are concerned for the helpless (which could equally be translated, 'the weak'), for such people do God's work instead of the work of evil, and the Lord promises them their own healing (41:3). The last verses of the psalm reinforce this message (40:10-13). The work of healing turns the weakness of illness back into strength, which means that 'the enemy no longer defeats me' (41:11). This is a specific example of the saving and delivering work of God, and in a way, it summarises the message of many of the other psalms in Book One of the Psalms.

Going Deeper

Psalm 41 has a number of surprises for us as we study it, and we will look at each of its three main sections in turn. The first requires us to look at it from the point of view of God's Covenant community; the second connects with other interesting Scriptures, and the third is prophetic of the work of Christ. There is plenty to discover!

The power of the Lord to save

When we read the first three verses of Psalm 41, our eyes are quickly drawn to the beginning and the conclusion, which together promise that God will 'restore to full health' those who are themselves concerned for the welfare of the helpless. We may quickly draw the conclusion that this passage means God will bless and heal those who do His will, but the observable fact that there are many ill people who do God's will and remain unhealed is testimony to deeper things within this text than this, so we will use other Scriptures to help us go further.

Being concerned for the helpless, who in ancient times were generally spoken of as 'the widow, the orphan, and the alien' (Deut 27:19, Jer 7:6, Zech 10:7 etc.) was an essential part of what was required of the Covenant community of God's people. Also, the possession of the land and living in it without aggressive enemy action was also regarded as the Covenant blessing of God

(Gen 13:14f., Lev 26:6) An Israelite would have read this psalm and noticed that the first two verses spoke of the Covenant obligations first on Israel and then on God, and it followed that maintaining the Covenant was a pathway towards health and security. The message therefore appealed to the People of Israel to remain faithful to the Covenant so that God could bless them as He had promised. If we take away our modern fixation on physical healing before we read verse 3, then it clearly speaks of God's 'sustaining' power even through illness. In other words, the Lord will protect His people from the worst that the world can do, and secondly, 'restore to full health' is a general phrase that encompasses all manner of mental, spiritual and physical reasons why we might be weakened. God promises 'wholeness' of body, mind and spirit to His people, but we should be focussed on our faithfulness to Him rather than judging God according to our own perceptions of the timescale of His healing power.

The Gospel encourages us to minister healing to people as a demonstration of the Gospel of Christ. When this happens, as it did at the time of Jesus' own ministry, people who are healed are drawn to faith and hopefully they will fully respond to the Gospel of salvation. Psalm 41 does not talk directly about the healing of complete salvation, but it does describe the healing and wholeness offered to God's people who are faithful, both in terms of 'sustenance' (41:3) and also the kind of supernatural healing we would associate with the term 'healing ministry'.

Friends?

The second part of the psalm begins with a standard prayer for healing for use when asking the Lord for help; 'Lord, have mercy on me; heal me, for I have sinned against you.' This prayer reads like a well used liturgy, but surprisingly, it does not occur anywhere else in Scripture. It is, however, the counterpart of the well known prayer of Solomon in the Temple 'if my people who are called by name will humble themselves, pray, seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.' (2 Chron 7:14). This prayer, like Psalm 41 is deeply rooted in the Covenant promises and blessings of the Lord (see 41:2), and the more you read these two passages side by side, the more you will see the connections. Solomon's prayer is the prayer of a King for the people, and it conveys a prophetic word of God about living in peace in God's land; Psalm 41 is the on-going testimony of God's people that God is true to this great prophetic prayer. If we do not read these two Scriptures together, we should at least recognise that they complement each other.

The remainder of the central passage, verses 5 to 9 are given over to the description of the activities of enemies who lie in wait on those who are ill, to see if they can take advantage if and when they die; 'when will he die and his name expire' (41:5). I have commented upon this above in the first part of the study. There is also a fascinating study in verse 6 of visiting friends who come only to gather information that they can use to their own benefit; a reflection of the tragic story of Job, whose long story of altercation with his friends (within the Book of Job) is too often ignored in favour of the intriguing story line of the first and last chapters.

The connection with the book of Job is greater than you might think, and it is all to do with how evil is described. In the first two chapters of Job, Satan is introduced as 'an accuser' (which is literally what the Hebrew words means), but there is little use of names for evil such as 'Satan' or 'the devil' or 'demons'; and there are only two other places in the Old Testament where Satan is named (1 Chron 22:1; Zech 3:1,2). Bearing this in mind, verse 8 is interesting; 'a devilish thing has come upon him'. Most Bible versions read 'a vile disease has come on him' (NIV), but the Hebrew word for 'vile disease' or 'devilish thing' is 'beliyya'al', which in Jewish writings between the Old and New Testaments is used as a name for a chief spirit of evil, called 'Belial'. Paul refers to this spirit of evil when writing to the Corinthians 'what do Christ and Belial (Belial) have in common' (2 Cor 6:15). Other translators are cautious of this connection, but it is really very significant, for this verse in Psalm 41 clearly refers to an illness as demonic, and describes this as what was thought by those who had gathered hoping for the death of the psalmist, when he was weakened by illness. The conclusion of this must be that the healing ministry of God described in Psalm 41 therefore includes deliverance from evil, and in this, it is prophetic of the ministry of Christ, far in advance of its time.

Connections with Christ

We can easily read the last few verses of this psalm (verses 10-13) as a confirmation of the wonderful work of God in healing. Even I, who await healing for my back and other problems,

rejoice to say that because of the healing power of God that I have already experienced, 'I know that You are pleased with me, for my enemy no longer defeats me.'

However, there is one last interesting point. Verse 9 talks of 'my good friends, whom I trusted and who shared my food, has sought to strike me down.' Read simply, it is a heartrending picture of friendship denied. However, it is impossible not to be reminded by this of the betrayal of our Lord by Judas, for the verse describes what happened at the end of the Last Supper. If we now read the last few verses of Psalm 41 as if Christ were saying them after His resurrection (please go back now and read them again) you will find in these verses a profound and victorious statement of the one and only great healing miracle by which Almighty God offers His love and healing to the whole of His Creation, which is the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ!

Of course, it is possible to read these verses as simply relating to our own healing. But because we are Christians who read God's Word in the light of Jesus' death and Resurrection, all this brings new light, power and significance to the end of the psalm. It begins with the healing blessings given to God's Covenant people, and ends with words which are prophetic of the Gospel by which we are saved from all evil! Psalm 41 has led us on a fascinating journey.

Application

You may well have picked up a number of interesting things along the path of this study. However, I would like to point out that the ending of the Psalm reminds us that there is one great healing miracle which enables all ministries of healing and deliverance, and that is the Resurrection of our Lord, who died and rose again. Every healing which is within the will and purpose of God happens in Jesus' name, and gives glory to Him; furthermore, the deliverance from evil that is sometimes part of healing (see 41:8) is only possible in the name of Jesus, who has defeated all evil (41:11).

People naturally ask thousands of questions about the ministries of healing and deliverance, one of which is this; 'what about people who are healed by medical means?' The answer is that God can use all means to bring healing, for He is God and can use all His creation for good and for His glory. Satan, however, can use healing for his own evil purposes; for example, sometimes evil people are healed and go on to do terrible and wicked things in the world. This should at least teach us that God Himself is the object of our praise and glory, not healing ministry! There are far more questions about all this than can be answered in this Bible study, but this psalm opens up the door to this vast and important subject in Christian ministry. It therefore deserves far more attention than it has received by those in the Church who are called to healing ministry.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Have you experienced a sense of injustice whilst ill, because of what friends, family or medical staff have done? Was this ever resolved?
2. Is it possible to be confident in the Lord's power to heal whilst living in a world of health care, readily available pills and alternative treatments for everything?
3. Are healing ministry and deliverance ministry the same thing, or are they different? How are the different, if they are, and why?

Discipleship

Some people in the church have a special interest in the healing ministry, and others do not appear to be interested; a few are hostile. For the true disciple, 'healing' should be a word which describes a large and important part of what the Gospel is all about, and it should be something they experience, give testimony to and also minister to others as part of the work of a disciple. Read through Psalm 41 and ask the Lord to show you where you fit in to the ministry of healing.

Final Prayer

Lord God, in the midst of everything that makes up my day, may my actions measure up to the moral principles of Your Word. Help me assess what I do so that I meet Your standards for just and righteous living, and also fulfil what is required of me. I ask this in Your name Lord Jesus. AMEN