

We knew from the beginning that the principle subject of the Psalms is the Anointed One. If the Son of David had not come we would naturally limit our study to the historical-grammatical and literary nature of the psalms. We would treat the psalms as a window into the liturgy and worship of ancient Israel. We would study their forms and attempt to reconstruct their ceremonial significance and their religious value. But Jesus has come and his prayer book has become our prayer book. We pray all the psalms with the voice of Christ singing the psalms to us. He is the Son of Man, whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and he is the Son of God to whom the Father said, “You are my Son; today I have become your father” (Ps 1:2; 2:7).

The meaning of the psalms pivot on a comparison between the “tenuous portrait of a king at risk” and the king enthroned and installed on Mount Zion (Ps 2:6).¹ David is the type. Jesus is the archetype. David embodies the fallen human condition and Jesus is God’s redemptive provision. Through David we see ourselves and our need for salvation. In Jesus Christ we see the Savior. The Incarnate One embodies the meaning of faithfulness and fruitfulness: “Blessed are all who take refuge in him” (Ps 2:12).

The interpretative key for the psalter is summed up in David’s revealing line: “The Lord says to my Lord: Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet” (Ps 110:1). The psalmists *hear* and *respond* to the Word of the Lord. Yahweh, the sovereign Lord, designates “my Lord” as the everlasting King who rules and reigns. The inspired narrative of the psalms explores the anguish and the ecstasy of the human story but always with a view to the meaning of “my Lord.” The soul-revealing transparency of “the man after God’s own heart” reveals our deep need for a Savior. Every lament cries out for deliverance and every praise calls out in hope. The psalmists knew that everyone has a story but only one story redeems our story.

Beatitude-Based Belief

*Blessed are those who have regard for the weak;
the Lord delivers them in times of trouble.
The Lord protects and preserves them –
they are counted among the blessed in the land –
he does not give them over to the desire of their foes.
The Lord sustains them on their sickbed
and restores them from their bed of illness.
I said, “Have mercy on me, Lord;
heal me, for I have sinned against you.”*
Psalm 41:1-4

The first word of the psalm, “blessed,” recalls the first word of the Psalms as well as the first word and opening theme of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. “Blessed” implies a state of grace, not a means of grace. The first line of the psalm develops the closing theme of Psalm 40. David says,

¹ Gerald Wilson, *Psalms*, vol 1: The NIV Application Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002, 651.

“But as for me, I am poor and needy; may the Lord think of me” (Ps 40:17). Psalm 41 begins, “Blessed are those who have regard for the weak.” The link between the two psalms underscores the truth that to receive mercy is to extend mercy. Those who show mercy to others are people who have been transformed by God’s mercy. They acknowledge their utter dependence upon God. They know that they are saved by God’s grace alone, and that the evidence for being genuinely poor in spirit (the first beatitude) is to show mercy (the fifth beatitude). The reason they are merciful is because they live in awe of the God who has shown them mercy.² “...The merciful are those who reflect God’s acceptance of the unworthy, the guilty, and the ones in the wrong, because they have received mercy themselves. They are conscious of their own unworthiness, guilt, and wrong and have experienced God’s forgiving and restoring acceptance through the message of Jesus Christ. There is often a unique feeling of understanding, a healing rapport, between those sharing a common trauma. This common bond can serve as a basis for conduct.”³

The beauty of the biblical meaning of mercy is that it covers the full range of human need. It expresses compassion for the lost, as well as compassion for the hungry. The mercy of God addresses both our spiritual and physical needs in such a way as to respond to the fact that we are made in God’s image. Those who are deeply moved by the mercy of God have a deep affinity for those in need of God’s mercy. This is why the apostle Paul challenged us on the basis of God’s mercy,” to offer our bodies as living sacrifices (Rom 12:1).

The day before Good Friday Jesus left the temple and went to the Mount of Olives to preach his final sermon. Jesus concluded his Sermon on the End of the World (Matthew 24-25) with a description of the Last Judgment. He described the difference between the saved and the lost with a simple picture.⁴ The division between the saved and the lost, will be as simple as a shepherd dividing sheep and goats. And the telling characteristic of the saved is that they *see* invisible people, the poor, weak, and needy people. Jesus expects us to see those in need.

Two groups stand before the Son of Man when he comes in all his glory. He is the King and he will say to those on his right, “Come, you who are *blessed by my Father*; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.” Those on the King’s right are “blessed by my Father” and recipients of the inheritance prepared since the creation of the world. Those on the right are *not* commended for performing great signs and wonders. They are commended for feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, hospitality to the stranger, clothes to the needy, care for the sick, and friendship to the imprisoned. Moreover they do this naturally, automatically, routinely. Need-meeting in the name of Jesus is who they are. The gospel of Jesus Christ plays itself out in 10,000 ways in the daily routine of ordinary self-less concern for the other.

There is something beautiful about the *ignorance* of those on the right: “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a

² Webster, Soundtrack of the Soul: The Beatitudes of Jesus, 60-65.

³ Robert Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 105.

⁴ Webster, Text Messaging, 121-124.

stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go and visit you?” (Matthew 25:37-39). This is an ignorance that runs contrary to the presumption of works righteousness. It fits with “so-that-no-one-can-boast” salvation by grace through faith. Because of Jesus Christ the righteous care for the needy and they do so without showy piety or inflated spirituality. Jesus says to us, *“Get a life. Mix it up. Put yourself in the company of the needy. Keep your eyes peeled for poor widows. Don’t divert your eyes from the lame. Pay attention to them. Let’s not make ministry into a mystery. Get in the game. Just do it!”*

On this side of eternity we remain poor and needy. The psalmist leaves no impression of an easy life and Jesus didn’t sacrifice to make us successful. We are susceptible to disease and depression. We are subject to physical distress and mental breakdowns. Sickness and sin hound the human experience. The psalmist describes a range of trial from grave illness to wilful sins. We suffer because of our fallen human condition and because we sin against God. Nevertheless, because of the grace of God, the Lord’s blessing supercedes the suffering. The psalmist uses seven verbs to describe the merciful action of the Lord. He looks to the Lord to deliver, protect, preserve, bless, sustain, restore and heal. All of this is made possible because “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21).

Enemy-Induced Lament

*My enemies say of me in malice,
“When will he die and his name perish?”
When one of them comes to see me,
he speaks falsely, while his heart gathers slander;
then he goes out and spreads it around.
All my enemies whisper together against me;
they imagine the worst for me, saying,
“A vile disease has afflicted him;
he will never get up from the place where he lies.”
Even my close friend,
someone I trusted,
one who shared my bread,
has turned against me.*

Psalm 41:5-9

Augustine dwelt on the Good Friday wish of Jesus’ enemies, “When will he die and his name perish?” Their demonic design orchestrated Jesus’ death to rid the world of his name. If they could only kill him they would be done with him. The world would forget his name in a matter of weeks, if not days. However this did not happen. Augustine quoted Jesus to explain, “Unless a grain of wheat is buried in the ground, dead to the world, it is never any more than a grain of wheat. But if it is buried, it sprouts and reproduces itself many times over” (John 12:24 MSG). Through the centuries the malicious enemies of the gospel have sought to wipe out the name of Jesus. Every new persecution asks, “When will he die and his name perish?” Even to the present

day, Augustine wrote. Pagans plot and plan and look forward to a time when Christians will be no more because they still say, “When he shall die, then shall his Name perish.” But the Body of Christ only grows greater. “Christ died, His Name has not perished: the Martyrs died, multiplying more the Church so that the Name of Christ is known in all the nations.”⁵

In the upper room hours before Judas betrayed him, Jesus quoted from Psalm 41, singling Judas out as the friend who turned against him. “*But this is to fulfill the passage of Scripture: ‘He who shared my bread has lifted up his heel against me’*” (John 13:18). Jesus processed the painful betrayal by one of the Twelve by praying Psalm 41.⁶ The psalm offers prophetic insight and providential guidance in an otherwise unpredictable and perverse turn of events. Earlier, the psalm juxtaposed sickness and sin, now it juxtaposes the evil intent of known enemies and intimate friends. To break bread together is a metaphor for intimate fellowship. To lift up the heel against someone is a metaphor for contempt and deep animosity, especially in a Middle-Eastern culture. When Jesus lifted Judas’ heel to wash and dry his feet, we need not wonder what was going through his mind. This line from Psalm 41 filled Jesus’ praying imagination: “Even my close friend, someone I trusted, one who shared my bread, has lifted up his heel against me.” Patrick Reardon sees a descriptive correspondence between the psalmist’s enemies and Jesus’ Passion (See Mark 3:6; John 11:53). He concludes, “This psalm, then, narrates the prayer of Jesus in the setting of that unfolding drama of deceit and betrayal.”⁷

Resurrection-Inspired Hope

*But may you have mercy on me, Lord;
raise me up, that I may repay them.
I know that you are pleased with me,
for my enemy does not triumph over me.
Because of my integrity you uphold me
and set me in your presence forever.*

*Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
from everlasting to everlasting. Amen and Amen.*

Psalm 41:10-13

David concludes the psalm with a prayer for healing, a call for justice, and a desire to be in the Lord’s presence forever. It is fair to say that there is more going on in this psalm than David getting up off his sickbed and getting even with his enemies. We can readily imagine Jesus praying this psalm in the light of his Passion and transposing “raise me up” into the higher key of resurrection hope. There are aspects of this prayer that fit the Son of David better than David himself. To say, “I know you are pleased with me” and “because of my integrity you uphold me,”

⁵ Augustine, Psalms, 128.

⁶ Ross, Psalms, 884. Ross writes, “Jesus does not apply the whole psalm to his situation, only the betrayal. The verse is not a prophecy of Judas; rather, the words find their fullest meaning and significance in his betrayal of David’s greater son, Jesus Christ.” It is difficult to argue persuasively that Jesus limited the application of this psalm to a single reference when the whole psalm applies to his life and ministry.

⁷ Reardon, Christ in the Psalms, 80.

seems to express “a rather unexpected and audacious confidence.”⁸ But for the Son of David to make a bold claim on the day before Good Friday makes perfect sense. Jesus knowing “that the Father had put all things under his power and that he had come from God and was returning to God” (John 13:3), said to the Father, “I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began” (John 17:4-5). In accord with his judicial powers David asks for the strength to repay his enemies, but when the Son of David exercises his judicial powers he will bring about the final judgment. He will break the enemy with a rod of iron and “dash them to pieces like pottery” (Ps 2:9).

Psalm 41 ends on a note of Christ’s paschal triumph. Those who wished Jesus dead so that his Name would perish, must have been either gravely disappointed or else wonderfully converted. Augustine exclaimed, “Christ rose again, Christ was glorified.” To paraphrase Augustine: Now see all those who are converted in His Name. Now let them insult and shake the end. Or, let them shake their head in wonder and admiration.⁹

Book I concludes with a doxology, “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Amen and Amen.”

⁸ G. Wilson, *Psalms*, 655.

⁹ Augustine, *Psalms*, 131.