**Down but not out**  18/8/24 dkm am md

Read: Psalm 41, John 13:1-30

Text: Psalm 41

Psalms:

David’s life as detailed in the Scriptures was most remarkable. In his youth he demonstrated amazing trust in the Lord as he went off to fight the giant, Goliath. He became a faithful servant of King Saul, but Saul became jealous and turned against him. David had to flee for his life, even though he was anointed king by Samuel. David steadfastly refused to take vengeance on Saul. In this part of his life David clearly points forward to his ‘greater Son’ and Messiah, Jesus Christ our Lord. But David was not without sin, as clearly seen in his later life, yet it is still amazing how much of his life pointed forward to Jesus. He was, after all, a man after God’s own heart and the Lord’s anointed king.

In the psalms David reveals the joys and the fears of his heart to the Lord. Many of the psalms are prayers written in times of distress, times when he was on the run from Saul or fighting the Philistines. Some, like Psalm 41, and the three previous psalms, refer to a time of sickness, a time when enemies, and even so-called friends, resorted to malicious gossip and glee. Jobs friends were not exactly malicious, but they were not understanding or comforting towards Job in his affliction. This reflects the belief of Jews and others that sickness or affliction is God’s punishment for sin. While the Lord may allow us to be afflicted when we sin in order to remind us of our sin- ‘It is good that I was afflicted’ (Ps 119:71)- this is not always the case. Job was not guilty of any particular sin. David’s ‘greater Son’ never sinned but was terribly afflicted. He was betrayed and condemned and killed. But God did raise him from the dead on the third day. This was vindication against his enemies and against Satan. David pleads for healing by way of vindication against his enemies, who are God’s enemies. His concern was for the glory of God.

Psalm 41 is composed of four, three-verse stanzas, with a closing verse which is a doxology to the whole first book of psalms. Psalm 1 began with a beatitude, ‘Blessed is the man’, and this psalm also begins with a beatitude, ‘Blessed is he who considers the poor’. We will look at this psalm under three subheadings: ‘Confidence in God’s power to deliver’, ‘Cry for mercy in healing’, and ‘Certainty of God’s deliverance’.

**1.Confidence in God’s power to deliver**

‘Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy’. We know this beatitude or blessing spoken by Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount (Mat 5:7). Our ‘Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in mercy’ (Ps 103:8). If God is merciful and kind, we should be the same. In the Lord’s Prayer we are promised forgiveness when we forgive those who sin against us. Mercy, by definition, cannot be demanded, but God can and does demand certain conditions before granting mercy. Moreover, we must ask him for mercy if we want mercy.

If God regards the poor and needy we should do the same. Through Moses God declared, ‘There should be no poor among you’ (Deut 15:4 NIV). God’s people, and especially the king, were to help the poor and needy if they wanted God’s blessing. Kings who turned away from the Lord and started oppressing the poor, saw God remove his hand of blessing upon them and the land (Jer 5:28,29). We may not have a god-fearing king or prime minister, but God is still concerned for the poor and needy, and will defend them against oppressors. Christians are rightly concerned for widows and orphans (Ja 1:27).

David was king and he knew his responsibility before God to bring justice to the people and show concern for the poor and needy, for widows and orphans (Jer 22:15-17). He knew he would forfeit God’s blessing if he did not judge justly and did not show regard for the weak and helpless in society. From Paul’s letter to Timothy, we know that the immediate family has primary responsibility to care for needy relations, before the church or the nation (1Tim 5:8). David does not put his name to the principle of the beatitude that he refers to, but he knows that the Lord will bless him because he has considered the poor. He is confident that the Lord will deliver him when he is in trouble; He will preserve his life and deliver him from his enemies (41:2).

David may have been speaking from experience in saying the Lord will strengthen or heal him, but more likely he is speaking on the basis of God’s revelation in his word. God made it clear to Eli the priest that, ‘Those who honour me I will honour’ (1Sam 2:30). David sought to honour the Lord in all his words and works, and we must do the same. Do not expect the Lord to answer your prayer for mercy or help if you do not know him, and do not obey his commands- in both a positive and negative way.

David continues referring to ‘him’, meaning ‘himself’, saying the Lord would restore him or lift him up from his sickbed (41:3). If his sickness led to his death his enemies would gloat in an evil victory (41:2,8). David goes on to pray for mercy and for healing, not because he was afraid to die but so that his enemies would not rejoice in their wicked ways. When Jesus died on the cross his enemies, including and especially Satan, rejoiced, but when God raised him from the dead they were silenced, and Jesus was vindicated. Saul, who became Paul, not only stopped his evil pogrom against the followers of Jesus but was profoundly changed when he heard the risen Jesus speaking to him.

**2.Cry for mercy in healing**

Jesus quotes, by way of applying to himself, part of verse 9, so this is clearly a messianic psalm (John 13:18); Jesus did not ‘trust’ Judas even though he ate at his table. But this does not mean the whole psalm is messianic in the sense that it only refers to Jesus. The confession of sin in verse 4 cannot refer to Jesus. This is a psalm written by David with reference to his own life, but in the wonder of messianic prophecy also applies in parts to David’s ‘greater Son’. While David speaks with confidence of the Lord delivering him from his sickbed and from his enemies, he did not presume upon the Lord’s grace and power. He turns to the Lord in prayer, pleading for mercy, for forgiveness, and for healing (41:4).

We often speak of our innocence and the innocence of others in the face of oppression. If we truly were innocent, we could claim immunity from oppression and our right to justice. But no human being is entirely innocent. We have all sinned in some way (Rom 3:23, 1John 1:10). So, when the Lord delivers us, it is because of his mercy. And in pleading for mercy, we should examine our hearts before God who is holy, but also ready to forgive. We should identify and confess our sin. David does not tell us the particulars of his sin at this point, but he does confess before the Lord. All sin is against God of course (41:4, Ps 51:4).

David was on his sickbed, the place where the Lord often puts us for such self-examination; sickness includes any form of affliction of the body or soul. Job examined his heart when he was afflicted but, as we the readers are told, his affliction was for the glory of God. Thankfully Job, like David, turned to the Lord when afflicted, because too many turn and start blaming other people, or turning inwardly remain there in distress and even despair. Turn to the Lord who knows all about you and is powerful to deliver you from all sickness and trouble. ‘If we confess our sin, He is faithful and just to forgive us and cleanse us from all unrighteousness’ (1John 1:9). God’s justice is seen in the cross, where Jesus went bearing our sin and suffered the God-declared penalty for our sin, that we might be forgiven and escape this penalty.

While on his sickbed, David’s enemies came to visit him. They came to wish him well, as in a quick death! David was a good king, but any king has his enemies. David’s sin with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah made him a lot of enemies. Just who these men are who wanted him dead and his name to perish, we are not told, although a ‘familiar friend’ was among them (41:5,9). A man’s name would perish if he had no sons, which is why king’s sons were often assassinated along with the king, and why King Henry was so desperate to have a son. We again note that enemy and friend alike would have seen David’s sickness as God’s judgment upon his sin; but their ‘righteous’ condemnation of him which was in fact evil and malicious gloating. It would be interesting to hear just what they said to David. Maybe they even prayed for him, but what a hypocritical prayer it would have been.

David refers to them speaking lies or empty words; they were hypocritical liars (41:6). He refers to them ‘whispering together against me’ (41:7). Their whisper was that he had an evil disease that would bring him down to the grave: ‘He will rise up no more’ (41:8). Evil men love to whisper evil things about other people. Even if they say, ‘I hope you get better soon’, they are actually thinking, ‘You deserve to die’ or ‘I hope you die so all your riches will be mine and I will be king’. What did Judas think he would gain by betraying Jesus? John tells that he had the money bag and was a thief, and he did get thirty pieces of silver, of course (John 12:6). John also tells us that Satan entered Judas (John 13:2, 27). He was being used by Satan in a most wicked plot to destroy God’s only begotten Son.

David had a number of trusted friends turn against him in his life. He began his adult life with the king whom he served putting a price on his head. After he became king his own son, Absalom, turned against him, as did his advisor, Ahithophel (2Sam 15:14, 31). With Jesus, in whom these prophetic words are fulfilled, it was one of his own disciples, Judas Iscariot, who ate bread with him at the Last Supper, who ‘lifted up his heel against Me’ (41:9, John 13:18, 26,27). His betrayal of Jesus was accepted with delight by the Jewish leaders. Judas was later filled with remorse, but the Jews were not concerned for him. They took Jesus, condemned him in a sham trial, and convinced the Romans to crucify him. But as Jesus himself prophesied, he was raised again on the third day.

**3.Certainty of God’s deliverance**

‘But you, O Lord, be merciful and raise me up’ (41:10). Some say the renewed cry for mercy means this verse belongs to the previous section (cf. 41:4), but it could just as well lead into the last section, as set out in most Bible versions. David’s prayer for mercy is renewed, but with a sense of certainty. He says, ‘I know that you are well pleased with me’ (41:11). God would raise him up and he would be vindicated before his enemies. He speaks of repaying them, but only in a judicial sense as king. David left all personal vengeance to the Lord. David being raised from his sickbed, like Jesus being raised from the grave, was vindication of God’s anointed and triumph or victory over the enemy, namely Satan.

David’s confidence in the Lord’s deliverance, based on his concern for the poor and the mercy of God, is rewarded. He maintains his integrity and his faith in God and his promises even when on his sickbed and being abused by enemies- and betrayed by a close friend. God’s hand was upon him to raise him up and set him before God’s face forever (41:12). God would never leave him or forsake him; he would remain in God’s presence all the days of his life, and into eternity. Jesus, of course, maintained his integrity in the face of betrayal and provocation at the hands of his enemies. ‘As a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth’ (Isa 53:7). ‘When he was reviled, he did not revile in return. He committed himself to Him who judges righteously’ (1Peter 2:23).

The closing verse of praise is a fitting close to this psalm, but also to the whole first book of forty-one psalms; it is how all five books close. The word ‘blessed’ is not the same word as in the opening verse; it means ‘Praise be to’. God blesses us but we do not bless him in the same sense. We ‘bless’ God by words of praise and thanksgiving. We do so with ‘Amen and Amen’, with ‘Let it be so for ever and ever to the glory of God’.