

# Psalm 41

*Don't Waste Your Pain by being Thoughtless*

## 1. Introduction

Psalm 41 is Davidic, but David gives no indication of the period of his life in which he composed it. He mentions a “time of trouble”, “sickness”, and “enemies” who would be glad to see him dead and “his name perish”. Since Psalm 39 is a psalm of old age, perhaps Psalm 41 is from the period of David’s decline into the physical weakness of his last years – this is just speculation.

The location of Psalm 41 is significant. It closes Book 1 of the Psalter (Pss. 1-41), which is a book characterized by conflict. Both Psalm 1 and Psalm 41 open with the word that means “oh how happy!” Thus the book opens and closes with a declaration that appears to be at odds with the content of the book. This has led John Goldingay to comment:

The location of Ps. 41 at the close of book I draws attention to parallels with Ps. 1 at its beginning. Both open with a comment on the good fortune of the certain sorts of people. Psalm 1 declared the good fortune of the person who paid attention to the LORD’s teaching. The trouble is that most of the psalms in between have placed a question mark by any straightforward understanding of that declaration. They comprise protest after protest at the fact that life does not work out like that... [Psalm 41] as a whole thus faces two realities...but its declaration also nuances the declaration in Ps. 1 in the light of all that has come in between. There is good fortune in paying attention to the LORD’s teaching; there is also good fortune in paying attention to what happens to people for whom Ps. 1 seems not to work out, because such paying of attention reveals that this experience does not mean the LORD has simply gone away. The LORD acts faithfully either in preserving from trouble or in rescuing from trouble.

## 2. Structure

The psalm comprises a thesis (vv. 1-2b), a claim (vv. 2c-3) and a demonstration (vv. 4-12); v. 13 is the doxology with which Book 1 of the Psalter closes. I have indicated these sections in the translation at the end of these notes. The translation also includes indentation of the verses. This indentation is meant to show how the themes in the psalm form a “ring-structure”, as summarised below:

A<sup>1</sup> (vv. 1-3) *Thesis and claim*

B<sup>1</sup> (v. 4) *Prayer for grace*

C<sup>1</sup> (vv. 5-9) *Protest against enemies*

B<sup>2</sup> (v. 10) *Prayer for grace*

A<sup>2</sup> (vv. 11-12) *David's experience validates his thesis and claim*

v. 13 *Doxology closing Book 1 of the Psalms*

## 3. Notes

(a) *Thesis* (vv. 1-2b)

We’ve already notes that the psalm opens “how happy!” Verse 2b uses the same basic word to say “he will be called ‘happy!’ in the land”. This we see that the four lines of vv. 1-2b form a ring: (a1) “How happy...” v. 1a; (b1) “the LORD will deliver...” v. 1b; (b2) “the LORD will preserve...” v. 2a; (“he will be called ‘happy!’...” v. 2b. These four lines form a unit – the thesis of the psalm.

The “happy” man is one who “considers the poor man”. The word “to consider” means “to reason and to think through something complex and to come to a good conclusion and to find the right course of action.” It’s about insight and comprehension and it leads to prudent and successful action. The word is “maskil”, and it is normally used as the designation of a wisdom psalm (e.g. Pss. 32 and 42), or an adjective (“prudent” or “wise”). Interestingly the only person in the Bible who is designated “maskil” is David (1 Samuel 18:14-15).

The beatitude is pronounced on those who will pay attention to David (the poor man) and the experience David is about to relate, “because by doing so they will share his joyful gratitude for God’s help, which he is about to praise and which will reveal to them also the grace of their Lord. He who owes to God his deliverance from the affliction of an illness and from the pursuits of his enemies, is himself the man who is ‘considered’ to be ‘lucky’..., because his bed of suffering ‘has been transformed’ into joy (Calvin); he is a living witness to God’s gracious protection and help, and in his fate are implied a warning and a promise for the whole community of the godly. If we see the opening verses in this light, then they fit quite smoothly into the context of the whole psalm” (Artur Weiser).

(b) *Claim* (vv. 2c-3)

The “claim” is a staircase of three steps: (a) deliverance from enemies; (b) support in sickness; (c) restoration of health. Restoration to health is the climax.

The three elements re-appear in the “prayer and protest” (vv. 4-10), and again in the “validation” (vv. 11-12). But in the process, the presenting issue (sickness) and the promised outcome (restored health) are magnified – the presenting issue becomes sin (v. 4), and the outcome becomes moral vindication (v. 12a) and restoration to God’s presence (v. 12b), i.e. resurrection!

(c) *Demonstration* (vv. 4-12)

This section only makes sense as a demonstration from David’s experience that his claim is true and his thesis is valid. Hence, it should be read as a report of events that have happened – “If the greater part of this psalm is plaintive, the thankfulness at the end shows that the ordeal is already over” (Kidner).

Some commentators (including Kidner and Goldingay) believe that the quotation marks opened at v. 4 should not be closed until the end of v. 10.

The motif that characterized Psalms 38-40 reappears – an awareness of sin which coexists with a sense of freedom to appeal to the LORD.

The enemies' desire is not only that David might die but also that his line should be extinguished ("his name perish", v. 5). They take advantage of David's illness and weakness to conduct a "whispering campaign" against him. The verb "they whisper" (v. 7) derives from a word for snake charming – hence there is a sense of incantations against David. They gloat as though he were sure to die (v. 8). The coup de grâce is that David's friend has joined in the rebellion (v. 9).

Jesus referred v. 9 to Judas on the eve of his death (John 13:18).

David's desire is to be raised up from his sick bed (v. 10). The verb translated "raise me up" is a resurrection verb – when Jesus quotes verse 9 on the eve of his death, he is also aware of verse 10 and the prayer for resurrection!

Vv. 11-12 pick up the three elements of the "claim" (vv. 2c-3) in the same order, but now they are elevated – moral vindication and restoration to the presence of God forever. Thus the psalm sets before us the trajectory of the Christian life. To be sure, Pss. 38-40 have emphasised that the Christian life goes round in circles, swings back and forth, and goes up and down – but Ps. 41 reassures us that God will bring us through to the end of the path and the crown of life (Jas. 1:12).

(d) *Doxology* (v. 13)

"The coda invites readers to pause and look back over what we have thus far read about the LORD the eternal God of Israel. It presupposes that the Psalms are simultaneously theology and doxology. They are full of declarations about this God that invite a response – not merely study by especially worship and serious affirmation" (Goldingay, 1.590).

#### 4. Application: Don't Waste Your Pain by being Thoughtless

Adapted from "Don't Waste Your Cancer" by John Piper:

- We use our pain well if we hear in our own groanings the hope-filled labour pains of a fallen world.
- We use our pain well if we believe it is designed for us by God.
- We use our pain well if we believe it is a gift and not a curse.
- We use our pain well if we seek comfort from God rather than from our chances of recovery.
- We use our pain well if it prompts us to meditate upon death.
- We use our pain well if we learn that "beating" it means cherishing Christ rather than staying alive.
- We use our pain well if the time we spend reading about pain is balanced by the time we spend reading about God.
- We use our pain well if we use it to deepen our relationships with evident affection instead of letting it drive us into solitude.
- We use our pain well if we refuse to grieve as those who have no hope.
- We use our pain well if we learn to hate sin more than before.
- We use our pain well if we use it as a means of witness to the truth and glory of Christ.

#### Translation

<sup>1</sup> For the director of music; of David.

*(Thesis)*

Oh the happiness of the person who gives thought to the poor:  
in the day of evil the LORD delivers him.

<sup>2</sup> The LORD protects him and keeps him alive,  
and he is made happy in the earth;

*(Claim)*

and you will not give him up to the desire of his enemies.

<sup>3</sup> The LORD will support him upon his sick bed;  
all his bedding you will change in his illness.

*(Demonstration)*

<sup>4</sup> As for me, I said, "O LORD, be gracious to me!  
Heal my soul, for I have sinned against you.

<sup>5</sup> "My enemies are speaking evil of me:  
'When will he die, and his name perish?'

<sup>6</sup> "And if he comes to see [me], he speaks empty words;  
his heart gathers trouble for himself;  
he goes out and speaks it to the street.

<sup>7</sup> "All those who hate me whisper together about me;  
they think evil against me:

<sup>8</sup> "A worthless thing is poured out upon him;  
and he will not rise up again from the place where he lies.'

<sup>9</sup> "Even the man of my peace, in whom I trusted, who ate my bread –  
[even he] has lifted up [his] heel against me!

<sup>10</sup> "But you, O LORD, be gracious to me and raise me up –  
so that I may repay them!"

<sup>11</sup> By this I knew that you take pleasure in me:  
that my enemy was not able to shout in triumph over me.

<sup>12</sup> And as for me, you grasped me because of my integrity;  
and you caused me to stand in your presence forever.

*(Doxology)*

<sup>13</sup> Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting.  
Amen and amen!