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Blessed Are The Merciful

Psalm 41

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How blessed is he who considers the helpless; the LORD will deliver him in a day of trouble. The LORD will protect him and keep him alive, and he shall be called blessed upon the earth; and do not give him over to the desire of his enemies. The LORD will sustain him on his sickbed; in his illness, You restore him to health.

As for me, I said, “O LORD, be gracious to me; heal my soul, for I have sinned against You.” 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.

But You, O LORD, be gracious to me and raise me up, that I may repay them. By this I know that You are pleased with me, because my enemy does not shout in triumph over me. As for me, You uphold me in my integrity, and You set me in Your presence forever. Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Amen and Amen. (Psalm 41, *NASB)

Last year when we traveled to India, I noticed something interesting on the last flight into India and the first one that comes out. This year when I went back I was wondering if the same thing would happen. You have to understand that for many of the people who live in India one of the primary virtues is survival. They learn how to push, shove, and to grab. They learn to basically do whatever they need to do to get what they need to survive. That becomes a way of life for them, and that does tend to translate into almost every area of life. One of the things that was interesting to see is when you get on the last flight that goes into India, which is made up of primarily Indian people (in this case it was from Bangkok, Thailand into India) that same mentality of “I want what I want and I want it now” comes alive on the plane. I am sitting in my seat and people are coming in trying to find their seat. They are putting their luggage in and pushing the button that calls the stewardess because they want food; they want beverages; they want this and they want that. You keep hearing “Ding” and those little lights are coming on. It is just chaos, and the stewardess is saying, “You are going to have to wait until everybody gets in.” Then everybody is in and supposed to be seatbelted for take-off. But they are up walking around in the aisles and in the bathroom and getting into their luggage. We are sitting on the runway waiting to take off, but they will not sit down. Finally they sit down and we are ascending. The stewardesses are all belted in, but the people are back up in the aisles and into their luggage. They are pushing the buttons, “We want a beverage. We want food. Where is the service?” There is chaos, and that is the way the whole flight basically goes. It is a different flight than all the others.

I thought about that and thought about us back in the West. I concluded that we are really not any different, other than we probably do a better job of disguising our selfishness. We are probably more sophisticated in getting what we want. But in the end we are really not much different.

J. B. Phillips several years ago did a rewrite of the Beatitudes to fit the mentality of people in our culture. He says:

Happy are the pushers, for they get on in the world. Happy are the hard-boiled, for they never let life hurt them. Happy are they who complain, for they get their own way in the end. Happy are the blasé, for they never worry over their sins. Happy are the slave drivers, for they get results. Happy are the knowledgeable men of the world, for they know their way around. Happy are the troublemakers, for they make people notice them.

- J. B. Phillips, *When God Was Man*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1955 (pp. 26-27)

I think he has captured it fairly well. We understand that those who push, those who shove, those who complain, those who demand their own way—most of the time they get it. And they get it at the expense of those who don't. We understand that. There is a reason for that: it's because we live in a culture that is defined by competition based on comparison. We live in a culture where we get our sense of identity, our sense of significance, our sense of worth by how we compare with somebody else. So life is a competition. I am competing with you. I have to push and I have to shove; I have to demand and I have to get my own way. I have to make sure that I push my kids and make sure that they are first so that we all somehow come out ahead—because that raises my value, my worth, my feelings and significance.

That is what made Jesus' message so revolutionary when He walked on this earth in the first century. Jesus came not proclaiming a message of competition, but a message of *grace*. The message of grace was a message that said, "You cannot perform your way to God. This is not about your ability to perform and compete, but rather it is an acknowledgment that you cannot be good enough for God. So stop competing. Stop comparing. Simply receive the gift of what Jesus Christ did for you on the cross." That is the message of grace.

When we trust Jesus as Savior, part of what we are saying is that we cannot compete and compare to God. We die to that way of thinking and realize we just receive a gift that is offered to us. When I do that, I then realize I don't have to compete with you. I don't have to compare with you. I realize now my significance, my value, my worth comes from my relationship with God that is based on grace. This then, for the first time in my life, sets me free. Rather than competing with you, I can humble myself and serve you. In an environment of competition and comparison, I cannot afford to serve you. But in an environment of grace, I can and I must.

In the first century the Greeks did not consider humility to be a virtue; they considered it to be a weakness. Strength was to be assertive, to be prideful and get your own way. So Jesus was radical when He proclaimed a message of humility that flowed out of His message of grace—that we might be set free to serve one another.

Why is this so important? Why is it so important how we treat one another? It is because the sum degree of how you treat others will determine what you experience to be true of God. It is especially true that, in your hour of need, understanding who God really is to you in that moment will largely depend on how you have treated others.

We are looking today at Psalm 41, which is a psalm of David. The way this psalm is organized, if you think of verses 1-3 as David's proclamation of his theology, in a sense it is a sermon. Then starting in verse 4, it is as if he goes home and applies this sermon to himself. This is how that theology is coming to life in his own personal experience.

The psalm begins:

How blessed is he who considers the helpless... (vs. 1a)

Everything else in this psalm flows out of this opening phrase, so we need to unpack this phrase. The word “blessed” is a Hebrew word that means happy. “How *happy* is the person who considers the helpless.” The exact same Hebrew word is used in Psalm 1, meaning to be happy or to be joyful.

Most of you are aware of the fact that the Book of Psalms is actually divided into five books. Book 1 goes from Psalm 1 through Psalm 41. As a matter of fact, if you look in your Bible, in most translations right in front of Psalm 42 there is a notation that says “Book 2” and that is true then through the Psalms. You have all five books in there.

It is worth noting that Book 1 starts with “this is what it takes to be happy in the Lord” and ends with “this is what it takes to be happy in the Lord.” They are bookends that capture the first Book of the Psalms.

How blessed is he who considers the helpless...

Some of your translations use the word “poor” which is a little bit misleading. The Hebrew word includes the poor, but it is not limited to the poor. It is more a word that captures the poor, the despairing, the troubled, the struggling. That is why the NASB uses the word “helpless.” It is those who are just feeling overwhelmed and under the pile.

It is interesting to notice that the word “helpless” is in the singular. We tend to think of these people in groups, but the psalmist is saying, “I don’t want you to think of a group. I want you to think of that *person*”—that person in your peer group, that person in your school, that person in your neighborhood, that person in your workplace. It may even be that person in your home. There is that person who is hurting, that person who is struggling, that person who is under the pile and is overwhelmed and despairing. Blessed or happy is the person that considers the helpless.

The word “consider” means to pay special attention to. It includes compassion, but is not limited to that. It is the idea of rather than just walking by and ignoring that person, or perhaps somehow condemning or judging that person, stopping and responding with wisdom. That is what the word actually means. It goes beyond just compassion to an actual response. But it is a response that is driven by wisdom. It means I understand, given the need of the moment, this is what I should do and this is when I should do it in order to meet that person at his or her point of need.

Blessed, then, is he who considers the helpless. Why?

The Lord will deliver him in a day of trouble. (vs. 1a)

In other words, David is saying, “Some day *you* are going to be that person who is helpless. You are going to be the person who is despairing. You are going to be the person who is overwhelmed and in need. And if you have made a life of extending grace and mercy to those in need, then God will meet you there and consider you in your hour of need.”

It sounds very much like what Jesus said in Matthew when He said, “Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy.” If you have made it a way of life to extend mercy to others, then in your hour of need you will experience the mercy of God.

He goes on then to define more of what that means in verse 2:

The LORD will protect him and keep him alive, and he shall be called blessed upon the earth; and do not give him over to the desire of his enemies. The LORD will sustain him upon his sickbed; in his illness, You restore him to health. (vs. 2-3)

The one who considers the helpless in his hour of need will find that the Lord will consider him, and He will protect him and sustain him. He will heal him and He will deliver him. He will be there for him. This is David's sermon. This is David's theology. It is all in the third person until you get to verse 4, and then it sounds like he goes home and applies this sermon to himself. It shifts to the first person:

As for me, I said, "O LORD, be gracious to me; heal my soul, for I have sinned against You." (v. 4)

Is David saying that because he has considered the helpless he deserves God's help now? The answer is no, because he says, "God be gracious to me. Be merciful to me." That term itself means, "God, I don't deserve this. I am asking for something that is undeserved." He is appealing on the basis of God's grace. Saying we deserve more grace is a contradiction in terms. Grace is an *undeserved* favor.

Sometimes when we are struggling and we are despairing, it is hard for us to claim the promises of God. The reason we do is because we look at our performance. We look at our track record and we are not doing very well at that moment, so we tend to think, *I just don't deserve that*. That misses the whole point. David's appeal of grace is his way of saying, "God, I don't deserve this, but You promised."

If you go back in the Law to the Book of Deuteronomy, you see many statements where God said, "If you show mercy to others, I will show mercy to you. You consider the helpless and I will consider you." It is not that we have earned it. It isn't that we deserve it. It is just that God promised. In our hour of need, we claim the promises of God, not looking at our track record and trying to figure out if we deserve it—because we don't. We appeal on the basis of grace. At the same time we say, "God, You did promise, so I am going to believe that."

It is interesting in verse 4, David acknowledges that his issue is related to his sin. David's despair—his situation, his struggle—is a consequence of his sin. Most commentators believe this is a reference to his sin with Bathsheba and all of the consequences that flowed out of that. If you are unfamiliar with the story, David was the king in Israel. He had an adulterous affair with a woman by the name of Bathsheba. Through that affair she became pregnant, and in order to cover up his sin David had Bathsheba's husband murdered and then he married her. He thought that nobody would figure out that the child had come through this adulterous affair. I think most people had it figured out.

Time passes and one of David's sons by the name of Amnon raped one of David's daughters. It would be his half-sister and her name was Tamar. It was a horrible sin. David found out about it, but he did nothing. He did nothing, and that so angered Tamar's brother, Absalom, another one of David's sons, that he put together a plan. At the right moment he killed his half-brother Amnon and then he fled.

One of the big problems with leaders involved in gross sin is that they lose their platform to lead. David knew that Amnon was guilty of sexual sin, but what was he going to say? David was also guilty of sexual sin so he could say nothing. He knew that Absalom was wrong in murdering his brother, but David had done the same thing. What was he going to say? He had no platform. He was guilty of the same sin, so he said nothing. He was rendered powerless. What happened is that the kingdom just began to unravel and fall apart. David was no longer leading and everything was coming apart at the seams.

It appears that David then became physically ill and he despaired. It is out of that context that this psalm is written. Eventually David convinced Absalom to come back into the kingdom, and he showed him mercy and grace.

My enemies speak evil against me, “When will he die, and his name perish?”

(v. 5)

We would expect that from our enemies. They are looking at David in his illness and his despair. They are wondering, *When is he going to die and get this over with? Wipe out his family name and we will have a different monarch.*

Notice that from verse 5, that is plural, to verse 6 it becomes singular. He is talking about one person.

And when he comes to see me, he speaks falsehood; his heart gathers wickedness to itself; when he goes outside, he tells it. (v. 6)

What is he talking about there? He is probably talking about Absalom. Absalom came back and for a while pretended to be on David’s side, but in his heart he hated his father. So he would apparently go in to visit his father who was despairing and sick in bed. He would say, “Dad, how are you doing? I want you to know we are praying for you. We really love you. We can’t wait until you get better.”

But David said, “He is speaking falsehood. That is not really what is in his heart. He is gathering wickedness in his heart.” He would go back out to the gate and he would speak his wickedness. We know from 2 Samuel that Absalom went back out to the gate and as people came to see the king, Absalom would say, “You know, the king won’t listen to you. When was the last time he cared about your problems? When was the last time he led this kingdom? He is not leading; we are falling apart. But you know, if I were the king I would listen to your problems. I would solve your problems. I would take care of your needs.” And little by little, the people began to believe that, and Absalom began to steal away the hearts of the people. That is what David is talking about here. He knew that was happening.

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.” (vs. 7-8)

The people are whispering about David. They are gossiping. They are talking about his demise. What are they saying about him? They are saying a wicked thing is poured out on him. “A wicked thing” literally in the Hebrew is a thing of belie, which basically means a thing from the devil or a thing from a wicked place. It is a thing from the devil himself. In other words, they are saying that David is getting what he deserves. David had this coming; it is his own fault. And pretty soon he is going to lie down and he is not going to get up again. So they are judging him; they are condemning him. They are waiting for him to die.

Even my close friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted up his heel against me. (v. 9)

If you read 2 Samuel chapters 15, 16 and 17, he is probably talking about Ahithophel. This was David's counselor. He was David's friend; he was like part of the family. He would come in and eat with David. But Ahithophel betrayed David and sided with Absalom. As a matter of fact, Jesus even quoted this verse in the New Testament in reference to Judas' betrayal of Him. Why would Ahithophel do that? Maybe it was because he was Bathsheba's grandfather and he knew what David had done to destroy that family and he hated him for it. This was his chance now to condemn him, to judge him, to get even with him. So David feels the betrayal of his friend.

There is no verse in the Bible that says, "Blessed are the merciful, for those whom they have shown mercy to will show mercy to them." There is no verse that says that. As a matter of fact, oftentimes the very people to whom we have extended grace, whom we have forgiven, to whom we have extended mercy in our hour of need, are the same people that judge us and condemn us. They point their finger at us.

That is what David is experiencing. If you track the life of David, he was very kind to the hurting. He knew through his life he had considered the helpless. And many of these people were numbered among those to whom he had shown mercy and grace. Now in his hour of need, they were judging him. They were condemning him. They wanted him dead.

What often happens to us in that moment is that we begin to believe those people. Those people begin to say, "You had that coming. It's your own fault; you made those choices. It is not my fault." We feel that condemnation, and those people do not want to be around us. They pull away from us and we feel that. We start to believe they are right and we think, *It is my fault. I have failed. I had this coming.*

We start to then think that God is that way. That is why verse 10 is so important. It is the contrast:

But You, O LORD, be gracious to me and raise me up.

Again, don't miss the fact that David is *not* saying to God, "I deserve something else." He is not appealing on the basis of his performance. He knows his performance. He is appealing on the basis of God's grace—that God is not like these other people.

But You, O LORD be gracious to me and raise me up, that I may repay them. (v. 10)

I don't think he is talking there about vengeance. I think he just wants to set the record straight. These people are promoting a view of God that simply isn't right. God has not condemned him. God has not abandoned him. We know from 2 Samuel that David confessed his sin and God forgave his sin. But he still has to live with the consequences of his choices. He just wants to step up and set the record straight. He wants to correct the theology related to God.

By this I know that You are pleased with me, because my enemy does not shout in triumph over me. (v. 11)

That is an amazing statement! Can you imagine knowing that you could sin, and now these are the consequences of that sin and you are in despair to the point where you are physically ill? Your kingdom is falling apart and your son is leading a revolt against you. In the midst of that, you still have a correct view of God to where you can say, "But God, *You* are pleased with me. Everybody else hates me. Everybody else wants me dead. Even my closest friends are condemning me. But

God, You are pleased with me.” He knew God as a God of grace and mercy. He had been forgiven. While the rest of the kingdom hated him, God was pleased with him.

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

(v. 12)

“You uphold me” means “You grab hold of me; You hold onto me in my integrity, in my righteousness.” While the rest of the kingdom is saying, “You had it coming; you deserve it; it is your own fault; you are a loser,” David is saying, “But God, You don’t say that. You are holding me up in righteousness.” He understands that his righteousness is not based on his performance but on God’s grace and mercy. He is still righteous in the presence of God. We would say in the New Covenant, “We stand in the righteousness of Christ.”

And then he makes an amazing statement: “And you set me in Your presence forever.” Have you ever had somebody deeply, deeply wound you—hurt you very deeply? Do you say to that person, “I sure would like to have you with me forever”? I tell you, that is not what comes out of my mouth. I want them gone. “I don’t want to look at you. I don’t want to talk to you. I don’t want you around me.” And yet David understands that even though he sinned against God, even though he has offended God, even though from what he is hearing from his friends and his people sounds like they don’t want anything to do with him, he still understands that God wants to be with him forever.

As a matter of fact, “You set me in your presence” is a very strong Hebrew word that was used to describe a soldier crouched and ready to take on the enemy. It is not a soldier at attention; that is a different word. This is a word that is more the idea that he is crouched down and he has his sword and shield ready. When the enemy comes over the hill he is going to let him have it, but there is no way that enemy is getting through. It is a picture that even in this moment, God has set David in His presence and He is crouched. Anyone that wants to take him away, God is going to let him have it. “You can’t take him. He is going to be with me forever.” That is an amazing statement given David’s circumstances.

You say, “Why would God do this? What is there about David that was so great that God wanted him around?” Nothing. It was not about David. It was about *God*. That is what verse 13 tells us:

Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Amen and Amen.

That word “blessed” is a different Hebrew word. It means praise. Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel. Why would God do this? God did it for Himself, that He might put His mercy and grace on display in the heavenlies forever. It was not about David. It was about God and His grace and mercy.

One of the questions that arises out of this text is: How could David remain so theologically correct in this time of despair, when everyone else is condemning and judging him? Everyone else wants him dead, even his closest friends. In those moments, it is so easy to believe all that and to think that God feels the same way. In the midst of all of that, David was able to say, “But God, *You* are not like them. You are pleased with me. You are upholding my righteousness. You want to be with me forever.” How did he maintain such a right perspective?

He tells us in verse 1: he has spent his life considering the helpless. It had become a way of life for David to give away grace and mercy. It is only when we begin to give away grace and mercy

ourselves that we begin to understand God's grace and mercy to us. When we find the helpless, the needy, the struggling, those that we would rather condemn, and instead we show grace and mercy to them, we begin to understand God's grace and mercy to us.

Let's understand that any time we fail, when we sin and we live with the consequences of that sin, there will always be Christians there to shake their heads and cluck their tongues and say, "Hey, it is your fault. You made those choices. You did that. You made your bed; you are going to have to lie in it. You are getting what you deserve. Sorry." There will always be plenty of people to do that. But those people who respond that way are the same people who, when they are in need, when they are troubled, when they have failed, when they have sinned, all they really feel is the judgment and condemnation of God—because that is all they have really known.

But we are to be a people who respond to those who are helpless and struggling with grace and mercy. Especially when it is those people who have hurt me and what they deserve is condemnation and judgment, what I would like to say is, "It is your own fault. Why don't you just die and get it over with?" But instead, I dispense grace and mercy. When I practice that as a way of life, then in my hour of need I will experience the grace and mercy of God. When the world is condemning me I will know, *God, You are still pleased with me. God, You are still upholding my righteousness in Christ. Nobody else wants to be with me, but You want to be with me forever.*

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

*Scripture quotations are from the NASB (New American Standard) translation.