

2-20-2000

Psalm 41: To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David.

Walter E. Keller
Valparaiso University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/kellerpsalms>

Recommended Citation

Keller, Walter E., "Psalm 41: To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David." (2000). *Walter E. Keller's Devotional Studies of Psalms*. 44.

<https://scholar.valpo.edu/kellerpsalms/44>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University Archives & Special Collections at ValpoScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Walter E. Keller's Devotional Studies of Psalms by an authorized administrator of ValpoScholar. For more information, please contact a ValpoScholar staff member at scholar@valpo.edu.

Psalm 41
To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David.
(Revised Common Lectionary)

Part One

Verses 1-3 are a statement of basic convictions which serve as a basis for the instruction which the rest of the Psalm is intended to convey. The instruction regards how the LORD blesses those who take care of the “poor,” that is, those who are needy and helpless, not simply the economically poverty stricken. People who are thus considerate of others will in turn be delivered in their day of trouble, protected and kept alive, acquire a good reputation in the land, and be healed from their sickness.

Vv. 1-3

- ¹ How blessed are they who consider the poor** (the weak and helpless);
 ^b **the LORD delivers** (saves) **them in the day of trouble.**
- ² The LORD protects them and keeps them alive;**
 ^b **they are called** (regarded by others as) **blessed in the land** (of Israel).
 ^c **He does not give them up to the** (ill) **will of their enemies.**
- ³ The LORD sustains** (strengthens) **them on their sickbed;**
 when illness befalls them, he will make them well (American Bible Society).

The Hebrew of these verses is written in third person singular: “How blessed is he who, etc.” In our day it is appropriate in such cases to use the third person plural to express the intended universality of the instruction.

The Psalmist makes an observation about life: those who have regard for the poor and needy (verse 1a), attract, as it were, the blessing of Yahweh. Moreover their blessedness is highly visible; they are known throughout the land for their good fortune (verse 2b). What is chiefly in view here is that when such compassionate people themselves fall upon hard times, Yahweh delivers them (verse 1b). Specifically, when they become gravely ill, Yahweh keeps them alive (verses 2a, 3). And by keeping them alive, Yahweh disappoints the evil thoughts of their enemies (verse 2c). We could regard this, therefore, as the Old Testament anticipation of Jesus’ beatitude (Matthew 5:7): “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.”

It is clear that the Psalmist, presumably David, thought of himself as such a compassionate person, that is, one who helped the poor and the needy. It is furthermore clear from the way the Psalm continues that David had experienced grave illness (recall Psalm 30). But David did not experience compassion in his hour of need from some of those from whom it could have been expected. The blessing of verse 1a upon those who regard the poor does not extend to some of his companions (his court?), because they had no regard or concern for him when he was poor and needy (verses 4-9). But Yahweh was gracious, and in that the Psalmist has every reason to rejoice (verses 10-12).

Part Two

In verses 4-9 the Psalmist recalls how he had once asked for healing and laid his case before the LORD. He had been gravely ill, but he was surrounded by false friends who wished his death. He was even betrayed by a close friend.

Vv. 4-9

**⁴ As for me, I said, “O LORD, be gracious to me;
heal me, for I (OR: even though I) have sinned against you.”**

Many people seem to sense that there is, or at least that there ought to be, a moral correspondence between my behavior and my fortune. I enjoy good health, because I take care of myself and, when necessary, take my medicine. I can understand my illness, if I failed to take my medication; it is my own fault if I then get sick. In such cases issues of health and illness seem directly under our control. What is more, they seem to fall under the law of moral correspondence: If I do what is right and prudent, I will prosper; but if I do what is wrong and foolish, I will experience adverse consequences. If I stay healthy, I can take the credit; if I suffer ill health, I have no one but myself to blame.

Often people do get sick as a direct result of their immoral behavior. Drug and alcohol addiction come to mind. Once addicted, the person is helpless, out-of-control. But s/he is not normally helpless after the first use; the decision to continue to use is mine, and therefore I am to that extent blameworthy.

It gets much tougher, of course, to subscribe to the law of moral correspondence when, through no fault of my own, I become ill. Many people then ask, “What have I done to deserve this?” The question is even more poignant when someone is faced with a life-threatening illness. Then we have to help one another refine the law of moral correspondence. I must learn that, say, cancer or Parkinson’s Disease are not a direct result of my sinning. That does not cure my cancer or Parkinson’s Disease, but it does relieve my over-burdened conscience.

And yet, I find it instructive how, despite such assurances, grave illness has a way of reminding us of our sinfulness. When people get gravely ill, they almost instinctively cry out to God for help, often with a reproach of God for causing, or allowing, this unfairness to happen. That is only natural, and it is perhaps even good therapy to get it off one’s chest. But at the same time, once we bring God into the picture, we also enter a realm where we begin to sense that not all is well between God and us. We can go only so long in accusing God of unfairness and of being the guilty party. There may perhaps be a lack of correspondence between my moral profile and my cancer that allows me to say that I am relatively innocent. It may well be true that I have done nothing extra-ordinarily bad to deserve this. The Psalmist also did that (see below in verse 12). But in the end there is an even greater lack of correspondence between the holy and immortal God and me. In that encounter I feel mortal and vulnerable and, like Isaiah (6:5), unclean. My illness is the unremitting reminder of that disproportion.

That is what the Psalmist was feeling when in his illness he asked Yahweh to be gracious to him. In verse 4 he asks the LORD to heal him, and then he continues with a phrase that can be translated in two different ways:

- 1) Heal me, *for* I have sinned. This would mean that his illness is a punishment for sin. The prayer is then an acknowledgement of that sin; and the confession of that

sin is the basis for asking to be healed. Because I have sinned, I am stricken with grave illness; the moral correspondence remains intact. Because I acknowledge my sin and repent, I ask to be healed. Thus restored health is linked to my repentance, and the moral correspondence again is intact.

2) Heal me, *even though* I have sinned. This too would mean that his illness is a punishment for sin, but now the prayer to be healed is disconnected from the sin. Because I have sinned, I am stricken with grave illness, and do not really deserve the asked-for healing; to that extent the moral correspondence remain intact. But in this reading, the Psalmist is asking for healing *despite* his sin and unworthiness.

Healing is not based on any moral capital I might have accrued from the fact that I acknowledged my sins. In other words, while confession of sins is a good thing to do, it does not merit the healing I am asking for. David says, “Be gracious and heal me, despite the fact that I have sinned and do not merit healing.” The grace of healing derives solely and alone from the LORD’s willingness to be gracious. The LORD does not owe me one because I have confessed my sins.

5 My enemies wish the worst for me:

“When will he die, and his name perish (be utterly forgotten)?”

6 And when they come to see me, they utter empty words (speak insincerely);
their hearts gather slander,
then they go out and spread it abroad.

7 All who hate me whisper together about me;
they imagine the worst for me.

8 They say, “A deadly thing (an evil spell or fatal curse?) **is poured out on him,**
he will not rise again from where he lies (he will never recover).”

9 Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted,
who ate of my bread, has lifted his heel against me (i.e., betrayed me).

This is the doleful catalog of the faithlessness of the Psalmist’s supposed friends. They do not qualify for the blessedness that attaches to ministering with compassion to the poor and needy. Part of our praying of this Psalm might include the refrain: “From friends like this preserve us, heavenly Father.”

Of special interest is verse 9b. St. John recalls that Jesus quoted this verse (John 13:18) when he was instructing his disciples in the Upper Room the night of his betrayal, arrest, and sentencing. Jesus was speaking of Judas (John 13:26-27), who, though one of Jesus’ own chosen Twelve, nevertheless betrayed him into the hands of those who sought his life.

Thus these verses in which David is speaking of himself show another dimension which David could not have known. In this most painful moment of his life, he became the (proto)type of great David’s greater Son, the Messiah. Even Christ, when he experienced the hostility of his enemies, also suffered the bitterness of being betrayed in his hour of need by one of his most trusted friends.

Part Three

In verses 10-12 the Psalmist asks the LORD to be gracious, in the face of the hostile hopes of his adversaries. When the LORD heals him, his recovery will be a sign that the LORD is pleased with him.

Vv. 10-12

¹⁰ But you, O LORD, be gracious to me,

^b and raise me up (heal me), **that I may repay them** (get even with them).

¹¹ By this I know that you are pleased with me;

because my enemy has not triumphed over me.

¹² But you have upheld me because of my integrity (righteousness),

^b and set me in your presence forever (i.e., as long as he lives).

David's earthly friends wished him ill. (Were they perhaps rival factions vying for the throne he would leave upon his death?) But he appealed to the gracious LORD (verse 10). In the conflict between David and his false friends, David knows that Yahweh is pleased with him, not with them, because, though they wanted him dead, Yahweh granted him life (verse 11). Yahweh "set him in His presence forever" (verse 12b). Old Testament believers had not yet at this time been given the revelation of an eternity beyond the grave. For them this expression meant "for life," but life bounded by death. Later in the Old Testament they began to think about life unbounded by death. This was an intuition that received its confirmation in Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

In general Christians will find this Psalm relatively easy to adapt as their own prayer, for they too become gravely ill, and then they too can use the language of this Psalm to pray to the LORD for healing. In our country we Christians are relatively free from enemies, but there are fellow Christians in other parts of the world who do face enemies who wish them harm in their distress. Bound as we are to fellow Christians by faith in the one holy catholic church, we need to think of them as we pray this Psalm.

But there are two troubling verses in this section of the Psalm for Christians who pray it:

1) In verse 12a we say, "But you have held on to me because of my righteousness." Christians have a hard time holding up their righteousness before God. Indeed, they ought not to, if they at all believe that we are justified before God, not by our works of righteousness, but by faith in the work of Jesus. It will help a little, if we bear in mind that David is here pleading his own *relative* righteousness. He is claiming that, when compared to his false friends who did not have compassion on him in his hour of need, he who was accustomed to showing such compassion (recall verse 1) was comparatively righteous. David is in effect saying, "LORD, by healing me you have given a sign that I am righteous in a way that they are not." But David could not plead before God that he possesses an *absolute* righteousness. Therefore, when David says that the LORD upheld him *because* of his integrity and righteousness, he is saying more that a Christian may say. A Christian knows that we simply do not own a righteousness sufficient for use as a bargaining chip in our intercessions with God. But Jesus Christ also prayed this prayer. He does possess a righteousness sufficient to bring before God, for he led the sinless and perfectly righteous life. And he can stand before God and say, "I have righteousness and integrity. I am everything that you, O Father, have designed the human being to be. I am in perfect tune with your will. And I am lending my righteousness for use by my

fellow human beings.” Therefore, Christians must pray this prayer “in Christ.” When we are in Christ, we pray this prayer with Christ as he is praying it. We pray it with a righteousness that is alien to us but proper to him. My integrity is Christ’s righteousness on loan, as it were. And for Jesus Christ’s sake, God listens to our prayer. For “our praying” is not simply *your* prayer and *my* prayer joined together. But it is your praying and my praying together with Christ’s praying that makes it “our praying.”

2) In verse 10b, the Psalmist prays, “Raise me up, O LORD, that I may repay my false friends.” The New International Version Study Bible, followed by the Concordia Study Bible, suggests that this means that David is expecting, as king, to hold them to account. That is a generous interpretation. The word means, “pay back,” or as we would say, “get even.” It is perhaps understandable that David, as an oriental absolute ruler, would summarily dispatch his enemies with a quick death; one does not stay in power by tolerating *lese-majesty*. It is more difficult, however, to imagine the Anointed of Yahweh acting so vindictively. It is virtually impossible to imagine great David’s greater Son, the Messianic Son of David, Jesus Christ, calling out to God to rescue and heal him so that he might get even with his enemies. In fact, great David’s greater Son, Jesus, taught and lived the exact opposite. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus taught (Matthew 5:43); “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say unto you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.” When he was crucified, Jesus prayed for his executioners (Luke 23:34): “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Therefore also the Apostle Paul teaches (Romans 12:19, 20): “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the LORD.’ No, if your enemy is hungry feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.”

Accordingly, when Christians pray Psalm 41 “in Christ” and get to verse 10, we shall have to do some interior translation. What we have heard from the Old Testament will in this instance have to yield to what Jesus says. When we say the words, “Raise me up so that I may repay them,” we shall have to supplement those words with the Spirit of Christ, “...that I may not repay evil with evil, but repay their evil with God’s own goodness.”

And yet..., even when we pray this Psalm “in Christ,” we need to face the shadow side of Christ’s teaching and work for us. Certainly Christ’s mission was to bring us life and salvation. But what if we reject him? That would make us enemies of Christ and enemies of God who sent Christ. What then? Jesus hints at the default when in Matthew 23:13-36 he speaks seven woes upon those who reject him, and ends up weeping over Jerusalem (Matthew 23:37-39; Luke 13:34-35). And then there is also the story in Matthew 25:31-46, where as Son of Man he will speak those terrible words to those on his left hand, “Depart from me...”

V. 13

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

Verse 13 is not truly a part of Psalm 41. It forms the conclusion to Book One of the Psalter (Psalms 1 – 41). The Psalter is divided into five books, analogous to the five books of the Torah (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy).

Prayer from the LBW to accompany Psalm 41:

Lord Jesus, healer of soul and body, you said, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy." Teach us to come to the aid of the needy in a spirit of love, as we have been received and strengthened by you; and to you be the glory and praise now and forever. Amen.

Nugget

Advice to evangelical theologians representing contending positions: "Do not attempt to read the words of Scripture outside the context of twenty centuries of interpretation. The Holy Spirit has not been snoozing since he inspired the New Testament. Please read the Scriptures with the help of those who have gone before."

Editorial, *Christianity Today*, February 7, 2000

Nugget

1. Hidden Christ, alive forever,
Savior, Servant, Friend, and Lord,
year by year, unseen, you offer
life undying, love outpoured.
Day by day, you walk among us,
known and honored, yet concealed,
freeing, chiding, leading, guiding,
till your glory is revealed

3. Still your life and way of living,
God revealing, Spirit-blown,
teaching, healing, sins forgiving
measure and inspire our own
loving earth's despised, rejected,
till with them you hang in pain,
broken, buried, resurrected
life laid down, our life to gain.

5. Christ our hope, alive among us,
take our love, our work, our prayer;
we will trust and tell your purpose,
braving evil and despair,
in your name befriending, mending,
making peace and setting free,
showing, giving and acclaiming
signs of joy and jubilee.

2. Endless orbits by our planet
spinning round its speeding star
cannot trace creation's secret:
why we live, and whose we are.
Jesus, you alone uncover
nature's rhythm, reason, rhyme,
so your birthday is our center:
hinge of history and time.

4. Who can tell, through earthly eons,
all your loving power has done,
changing hearts and shaping nations,
seeking all, rejecting none?
Speeches fail, but songs soar higher,
tracing how, in every place,
twice ten thousand years have numbered
countless works of boundless grace.

This text was runner-up in the Millennium Hymn Competition sponsored by St. Paul's Cathedral (Anglican) in London. This hymn was composed by Brian Wren, and may be sung to the tune "Rustington" (LBW #408) or "Beach Spring" (LBW #423), or any other 87 87 D metered tune

Nugget

I predict that the Christian martyrs of the 21st century will be men and women who elect to “ruin their lives” for the sake of justice, sanity and love. As the Christian martyrs of the first three centuries were accused of impiety, cannibalism and incest – i.e., the worst crimes that the Romans could imagine – the martyrs of the 21st century will be accused of hating progress and lacking self-worth, of not belonging to the 21st century – in short, of the worst crimes that our own empire can imagine.... Will the world be changed by such a witness? Probably not all of it, though perhaps a part. Does the result matter that much? I once heard Elie Wiesel (the famous Auschwitz survivor) tell the story of a prophet who came to a city and delivered his message every day in the marketplace. After a time his ranting became a fixture of the city’s life and people regarded him with amusement when they regarded him at all. Finally a little boy, pitying the old man, approached him and said, “Sir, why do you keep crying aloud like this every day, year after year? The people here will never listen to you.” “I gave up hope that they would listen to me a long time ago,” said the prophet. “I go on crying, lest I begin to listen to them.”

Garret Keizer in *The Christian Century*, February 16, 2000

Walter E. Keller

February 20, 2000 – **The Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany**