

AN EXPOSITION OF PSALM 41 by Charles H. Spurgeon

TITLE. - To the Chief Musician. A Psalm of David. This title has frequently occurred before and serves to remind us of the value of the Psalm, seeing that it was committed to no mean songster; and also to inform us as to the author who has made his own experience the basis of a prophetic song, in which a far greater than David is set forth. How wide a range of experience David had! What power it gave him to edify future ages! And how full a type of our Lord did he become! What was bitterness to him has proved to be a fountain of unfailling sweetness to many generations of the faithful.

Jesus Christ betrayed of Judas Iscariot is evidently the great theme of this Psalm, but we think not exclusively. He is the antitype of David, and all his people are in their measure like him; hence words suitable to the Great Representative are most applicable to those who are in him. Such as receive a vile return for long kindness to others may read this song with much comfort, for they will see that it is alas! too common for the best of men to be rewarded for their holy charity with cruelty and scorn; and when they have been humbled by falling into sin, advantage has been taken of their low estate, their good deeds have been forgotten, and the vilest spite has been vented upon them.

DIVISION. - The Psalmist in verses 1-3 describes the mercies which are promised to such as consider the poor, and this he uses as a preface to his own personal plea for succour. From verses 4-9 he states his own case, proceeds to prayer in verse 10, and closes with thanksgiving, verses 11-13.

EXPOSITION

(1) Blessed is he who considers the poor; Yahweh will deliver him in time of trouble. (2) Yahweh will preserve him and keep him alive, and he will be blessed on the earth; You will not deliver him to the will of his enemies. (3) Yahweh will strengthen him on his bed of illness; You will sustain him on his sickbed.

1. *"Blessed is he who considers the poor."* This is the third Psalm opening with a benediction, and there is a growth in it beyond the first two. To search the word of God comes first, pardoned sin is second, and now the forgiven sinner brings forth fruit unto God available for the good of others. The word used is as emphatic as in the former cases, and so is the blessing which follows it. The poor intended are such as are poor in substance, weak in bodily strength, despised in repute, and despondent in spirit. These are mostly avoided and frequently scorned. The worldly proverb bequeaths the hindmost to one who has no mercy. The sick and the sorry are poor company, and the world deserts them as the Amalekite left his dying servant. Such as have been made partakers of divine grace receive a more tender nature and are not hardened against their own flesh and blood. They undertake the cause of the downtrodden and turn their minds seriously to the promotion of their welfare. They do not toss them a penny and go on their way but inquire into their sorrows, sift out their cause, study the best ways for their relief, and practically come to their rescue. Such as these have the mark of the divine favor plainly upon them and are as surely the sheep of the Lord's pasture as if they wore a brand upon their foreheads. They are not said to have considered the poor years ago, but they still do so. Stale benevolence, when boasted of, argues present churlishness. First and foremost, yea, far above all others put together in tender compassion for the needy is our Lord Jesus, who so remembered our low estate that though he was rich, for our sakes he became poor. All his attributes were charged with the task of our uplifting. He weighed our case and came in the fullness of wisdom to execute the wonderful work of mercy by which we are redeemed from our destruction. Wretchedness excited his pity, misery moved his mercy, and thrice blessed is he both by his God and his saints for his attentive care and wise action towards us. He still considers us. His mercy is always in the present tense, and so let our praises be.

"Yahweh will deliver him in time of trouble." The compassionate lover of the poor thought of others

and therefore God will think of him. God measures to us with our own bushel. Days of trouble come even to the most generous, and they have made the wisest provision for rainy days who have lent shelter to others when times were better with them. The promise is not that the generous saint shall have no trouble, but that he shall be preserved in it, and in due time brought out of it. How true was this of our Lord! Never trouble deeper nor triumph brighter than his, and glory be to his name, he secures the ultimate victory of all his blood-bought ones. Would that they all were more like him in putting on bowels of compassion to the poor. Much blessedness they miss who stint their alms. The joy of doing good, the sweet reaction of another's happiness, the approving smile of heaven upon the heart, if not upon the estate--all these the miserly soul knows nothing of. Selfishness bears in itself a curse, it is a cancer in the heart; while liberality is happiness, and makes fat the bones. In dark days we cannot rest upon the supposed merit of almsgiving, but still the music of memory brings with it no mean solace when it tells of widows and orphans whom we have succoured, and prisoners and sick folk to whom we have ministered.

2. *"Yahweh will preserve him, and keep him alive."* His noblest life shall be immortal, and even his mortal life shall be sacredly guarded by the power of Jehovah. Jesus lived on till his hour came, nor could the devices of crafty Herod take away his life till the destined hour had struck; and even then no man took his life from him, but he laid it down of himself, to take it again. Here is the portion of all those who are made like their Lord--they bless and they shall be blessed, they preserve and shall be preserved, they watch over the lives of others and they themselves shall be precious in the sight of the Lord. The miser, like the hog, is of no use till he is dead--then let him die; the righteous, like the ox, is of service during life--then let him live.

"And he shall be blessed upon the earth." Prosperity shall attend him. His cruse of oil shall not be dried up, because he fed the poor prophet. He shall cut from his roll of cloth and find it longer at both ends.

*"There was a man, and some did count him mad,
The more he gave away the more he had."*

If temporal gains be not given him, spirituals shall be doubled to him. His little shall be blessed, bread and water shall be a feast to him. The liberal are and must be blessed even here. They have a present as well as future portion. Our Lord's real blessedness of heart in the joy that was set before him is a subject worthy of earnest thought, especially as it is the picture of the blessing which all liberal saints may look for.

"And thou wilt not deliver him unto the will of his enemies." He helped the distressed, and now he shall find a champion in his God. What would not the good man's enemies do to him if they had him at their disposal? Better be in a pit with vipers than be at the mercy of persecutors. This sentence sets before us a sweet negative, and yet it were not easy to have seen how it could be true of our Lord Jesus, did we not know that although he was exempted from much of blessing, being made a curse for us, yet even he was not altogether nor forever left of God, but in due time was exalted above all his enemies.

3. *"Yahweh will strengthen him upon the bed of languishing."* The everlasting arms shall stay up his soul as friendly hands and downy pillows stay up the body of the sick. How tender and sympathizing is this image. How near it brings our God to our infirmities and sicknesses! Whoever heard this of the old heathen Jove or of the gods of India or China? This is language peculiar to the God of Israel. He it is who deigns to become nurse and attendant upon good men. If he smites with one hand he sustains with the other. Oh, it is blessed fainting when one falls upon the Lord's own bosom and is borne up thereby! Grace is the best of restoratives. Divine love is the noblest stimulant for a languishing patient. It makes the soul strong as a giant, even when the aching bones are breaking through the skin. No physician like the Lord, no tonic like his promise, no wine like his love.

"Thou wilt make all his bed in his sickness." What, does the Lord turn bedmaker to his sick children? Herein is love indeed. Who would not consider the poor if such be the promised reward? A bed soon grows hard when the body is weary with tossing to and fro upon it. But grace gives patience, and God's smile gives peace, and the bed is made soft because the man's heart is content; the pillows are downy because the head is peaceful. Note that the Lord will make *all* his bed, from head to foot. What considerate and indefatigable kindness! Our dear and ever blessed Lord Jesus, though in all respects an inheritor of this promise, for our sakes condescended to forego the blessing, and died on a cross and not upon a bed. Yet even there he was after awhile upheld and cheered by the Lord his God, so that he died in triumph.

We must not imagine that the benediction pronounced in these three verses belongs to all who casually give money to the poor, or leave it in their wills, or contribute to societies. Such do well, or act from mere custom, as the case may be, but they are not here alluded to. The blessing is for those whose habit it is to love their neighbor as themselves, and who for Christ's sake feed the hungry and clothe the naked. To imagine a man to be a saint who does not consider the poor as he has ability is to conceive the fruitless fig tree to be acceptable. There will be sharp dealing with many professors on this point in the day when the King comes in his glory.

(4) "I said, 'Yahweh, be merciful to me; heal my soul, for I have sinned against You.' (5) My enemies speak evil of me: 'When will he die, and his name perish?' (6) And if he comes to see me, he speaks lies; his heart gathers iniquity to itself; when he goes out, he tells it. (7) All who hate me whisper together against me; against me they devise my hurt. (8) 'An evil disease,' they say, 'clings to him. And now that he lies down, he will rise up no more.' (9) Even my own familiar friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted up his heel against me."

Here we have a controversy between the pleader and his God. He had been a tender friend to the poor, and yet in the hour of his need the promised assistance was not forthcoming. In our Lord's case there was a dark and dreary night in which such arguments were well befitting himself and his condition.

4. *"I said"* -- said it in earnest prayer -- *"Lord, be merciful unto me."* Prove now your gracious dealings with my soul in adversity, since you did before give me grace to act liberally in my prosperity. No appeal is made to justice. The petitioner but hints at the promised reward, but goes straightforward to lay his plea at the feet of mercy. How low was our Redeemer brought when such petitions could come from his reverend mouth, when his lips like lilies dropped such sweet smelling but bitter myrrh!

"Heal my soul." My time of languishing is come; now do as you have said and strengthen me, especially in my soul. We ought to be far more earnest for the soul's healing than for the body's ease. We hear much of the cure of souls, but we often forget to care about it.

"For I have sinned against thee." Here was the root of sorrow. Sin and suffering are inevitable companions. Observe that by the Psalmist sin was felt to be mainly evil because directed against God. This is of the essence of true repentance. The immaculate Savior could never have used such language as this unless there be here a reference to the sin which he took upon himself by imputation. And for our part we tremble to apply words so manifestly indicating personal rather than imputed sin. Applying the petition to David and other sinful believers, how strangely evangelical is the argument: heal me, not for I am innocent, but *"I have sinned."* How contrary is this to all self-righteous pleading! How consonant with grace! How inconsistent with merit! Even the fact that the confessing penitent had remembered the poor is but obliquely urged; but a direct appeal is made to mercy on the ground of great sin. O trembling reader, here is a divinely revealed precedent for you. Be not slow to follow it.

5. *"My enemies speak evil of me."* It was their nature to do and speak evil; it was not possible that the child of God could escape them. The viper fastened on Paul's hand. The better the man the more likely,

and the more venomous, the slander. Evil tongues are busy tongues, and never deal in truth. Jesus was traduced [defamed] to the utmost, although no offense was in him.

"When shall he die and his name perish?" They could not be content till he was away. The world is not wide enough for evil men to live in while the righteous remain. Yea, the bodily presence of the saints may be gone, but their memory is an offense to their foes. It was never merry England, say they, since men took to Psalm-singing. In the Master's case, they cried, "Away with such a fellow from the earth. It is not fit that he should live." If persecutors could have their way the church should have but one neck, and that should be on the block. Thieves would fain blow out all candles. The lights of the world are not the delights of the world. Poor blind bats, they fly at the lamp and try to dash it down, but the Lord lives and preserves both the saints and their names.

6. *"And if he comes to see me, he speaks vanity."* His visits of sympathy are visitations of mockery. When the fox calls on the sick lamb, his words are soft; but he licks his lips in hope of the carcass. It is wretched work to have spies haunting one's bedchamber, calling in pretense of kindness but with malice in their hearts. Hypocritical talk is always fulsome and sickening to honest men, but especially to the suffering saint. Our divine Lord had much of this from the false hearts that watched his words.

"His heart gathers iniquity to itself." Like will to like. The bird makes its nest of feathers. Out of the sweetest flowers chemists can distill poison, and from the purest words and deeds malice can gather groundwork for calumnious [slandorous] report. It is perfectly marvelous [astounding] how spite spins webs out of no materials whatever. It is no small trial to have base persons around you lying in wait for every word which they may pervert into evil. The Master whom we serve was constantly subject to this affliction.

"When he goes abroad, he tells it." He makes his lies, and then vends them in the open market. He is no sooner out of the house than he is out with his lie, and this against a sick man whom he called to see as a friend--a sick man to whose incoherent and random speeches pity should be showed. Ah, black-hearted wretch! A devil's cub indeed. How far abroad men will go to publish their slanders! They would fain placard the sky with their falsehoods. A little fault is made much of; a slip of the tongue is a libel; a mistake a crime; and if a word can bear two meanings, the worse is always fathered upon it. Tell it in Gath, publish it in Askelon, that the daughters of the uncircumcised may triumph. It is base to strike a man when he is down. Yet that is the meanness of mankind towards a Christian hero should he for awhile chance to be under a cloud.

7. *"All who hate me whisper together against me."* The spy meets his comrades in conclave and sets them all to whispering. Why could they not speak out? Were they afraid of the sick warrior? Or were their designs so treacherous that they must needs be hatched in secrecy? Mark the unanimity of the wicked--*"all"*. How heartily the dogs unite to hunt the stag! Would God we were half as united in holy labor as persecutors are in their malicious projects; and were half as wise as they are crafty, for their whispering was craft as well as cowardice. The conspiracy must not be known till all is ready.

"Against me do they devise my hurt." They lay their heads together and scheme and plot. So did Ahithophel and the rest of Absalom's counselors. So also did the chief priests and Pharisees. Evil men are good at devising. They are given to meditation, they are deep thinkers, but the mark they aim at is evermore the hurt of the faithful. Snakes in the grass are never there for a good end.

8. *"An evil disease, say they, cleaves fast to him."* They whisper that some curse has fallen upon him and is riveted to him. They insinuate that a foul secret stains his character, the ghost whereof haunts his house and never can be laid. An air of mystery is cast around this doubly dark saying, as if to show how indistinct are the mutterings of malice. Even thus was our Lord accounted "smitten of God and afflicted." His enemies conceived that God had forsaken him, and delivered him forever into their hands.

"And now that he lies [down] he shall rise up no more." His sickness, they hoped, was mortal; and this was fine news for them. No more would the good man's holiness chide their sin; they would now be free from the check of his godliness. Like the friars around Wickliffe's bed, their prophesyings were more jubilant than accurate; but they were a sore scourge to the sick man. When the Lord smites his people with his rod of affliction for a small moment, their enemies expect to see them capitally executed and prepare their jubilates to celebrate their funerals. But they are in too great a hurry and have to alter their ditties and sing to another tune. Our Redeemer eminently foretokened this, for out of his lying in the grave he was gloriously risen. Vain the watch, the stone, the seal! Rising he pours confusion on his enemies.

9. *"Yea."* Here is the climax of the sufferer's woe, and he places before it the emphatic affirmation, as if he thought that such villainy would scarcely be believed. *"My own familiar friend."* "The man of my peace," so runs the original, with whom I had no differences, with whom I was in league, who had aforetime ministered to my peace and comfort. This was Ahithophel to David, and Iscariot with our Lord. Judas was an apostle, admitted to the privacy of the Great Teacher, hearing his secret thoughts, and, as it were, allowed to read his very heart. *"Et tu Brute?"* said the expiring Caesar. The kiss of the traitor wounded our Lord's heart as much as the nail wounded his hand. *"In whom I trusted."* Judas was the treasurer of the apostolic college. Where we place great confidence, an unkind act is the more severely felt. *"Who did eat of my bread."* Not only as a guest but as a dependent, a pensioner at my board. Judas dipped in the same dish with his Lord, and hence the more accursed was his treachery in his selling his Master for a slave's price. *"Has lifted up his heel against me."* Not merely turned his back on me, but left me with a heavy kick such as a vicious horse might give. Hard is it to be spurned in our need by those who formerly fed at our table. It is noteworthy that the Redeemer applied only the last words of this verse to Judas, perhaps because, knowing his duplicity, he had never made a familiar friend of him in the fullest sense, and had not placed implicit trust in him. Infernal malice so planned it that every circumstance in Jesus' death should add wormwood to it; and the betrayal was one of the bitterest drops of gall. We are indeed wretched when our *quondam* [former] friend becomes our relentless foe, when confidence is betrayed, when all the rites of hospitality are perverted and ingratitude is the only return for kindness. Yet in so deplorable a case we may cast ourselves upon the faithfulness of God, who, having delivered our Covenant Head, is in verity [truth] engaged to be the very present help of all for whom that covenant was made.

(10) "But You, O Yahweh, be merciful to me, and raise me up, that I may repay them."

10. How the hunted and affrighted soul turns to her God! How she seems to take breath with a "but, thou!" How she clings to the hope of mercy from God when every chance of pity from man is gone! *"And raise me up."* Recover me from my sickness, give me to regain my position. Jesus was raised up from the grave; his descent was ended by an ascent. *"That I may requite them."* This as it reads is a truly Old Testament sentence, and quite aside from the spirit of Christianity. Yet we must remember that David was a person in magisterial office, and might without any personal revenge desire to punish those who had insulted his authority and libeled his public character. Our great Apostle and High Priest had no personal animosities, but even he by his resurrection has requited the powers of evil, and avenged on death and hell all their base attacks upon his cause and person. Still the strained application of every sentence of this Psalm to Christ is not to our liking, and we prefer to call attention to the better spirit of the gospel beyond that of the old dispensation.

(11) "By this I know that You are well pleased with me, because my enemy does not triumph over me. (12) As for me, You uphold me in my integrity, and set me before Your face forever. (13) Blessed be Yahweh God of Israel from everlasting to everlasting! Amen and Amen."

11. We all are cheered by tokens for good, and the Psalmist felt it to be an auspicious omen that after all his deep depression he was not utterly given over to his foe. *"By this I know that thou favourest me."*

You have a special regard to me. I have the secret assurance of this in my heart and, therefore, your outward dealings do not dismay me, for I know that you love me in them all. *"Because my enemy does not triumph over me."* What if the believer has no triumph over his foes? He must be glad that they do not triumph over him. If we have not all we would, we should praise God for all we have. Much there is in us over which the ungodly might exult, and if God's mercy keeps the dogs' mouths closed when they might be opened, we must give him our heartiest gratitude. What a wonder it is that when the devil enters the lists with a poor, erring, bedridden, deserted, slandered saint, and has a thousand evil tongues to aid him, yet he cannot win the day but in the end slinks off without renown.

*"The feeblest saint shall win the day
Though death and hell obstruct his way."*

12. *"And as for me."* Despite them all and in the sight of them all, *"thou upholdest me in my integrity."* Your power enables me to rise above the reach of slander by living in purity and righteousness. Our innocence and consistency are the result of the divine upholding. We are like those glasses without feet, which can only be upright while they are held in the hand. We fall and spill and spoil all, if left to ourselves. The Lord should be praised every day if we are preserved from gross sin. When others sin they show us what we should do but for grace. *"He today and I tomorrow,"* was the exclamation of a holy man whenever he saw another falling into sin. Our integrity is comparative as well as dependent. We must therefore be humbled while we are grateful. If we are clear of the faults alleged against us by our calumniators, we have nevertheless quite enough of actual blameworthiness to render it shameful for us to boast. *"And set me before thy face forever."* He rejoiced that he lived under the divine surveillance--tended, cared for, and smiled upon by his Lord; and yet more, that it would be so world without end. To stand before an earthly monarch is considered to be a singular honor. But what must it be to be a perpetual courtier in the palace of the King Eternal, Immortal, Invisible?

13. The Psalm ends with a doxology. *"Blessed be the Lord,"* i.e., let him be glorified. The blessing at the beginning from the mouth of God is returned from the mouth of his servant. We cannot add to the Lord's blessedness, but we can pour out our grateful wishes; and these he accepts, as we receive little presents of flowers from children who love us. Jehovah is the personal name of our God. *"God of Israel"* is his covenant title and shows his special relation to his elect people. *"From everlasting and to everlasting."* The strongest way of expressing endless duration. We die, but the glory of God goes on and on without pause. *"Amen and amen."* So let it surely, firmly, and eternally be. Thus the people joined in the Psalm by a double shout of holy affirmation. Let us unite in it with all our hearts. This last verse may serve for the prayer of the universal church in all ages. But none can sing it so sweetly as those who have experienced as David did the faithfulness of God in times of extremity.