

Considering the Poor

Last week we began a new series of articles from Psalm 41. This is a Psalm of David's which teaches us—among other things—the importance of considering the poor. How do we properly care for the poor both *physically and spiritually*? We saw that the word translated “poor” is not narrowly concerned with only those who are struggling financially. The Psalmist is pointing to those who may be “weak, powerless, low,” or “helpless.” *This can be any of us at any given time!*

As we proceed further in this Psalm we see a series of promises given to the one who “considers the poor.” The LORD delivers him (vs. 1b), protects him and keeps him alive; he is respected by others; God does not give him up to the will of his enemies (vs. 2). Some suggest that this first section may read as *prayers* for those who “consider the poor.” For example: “*May the LORD protect him; May the LORD sustain him.*” (e.g., Psalm 20) Either *promise* or *prayer* could be linguistically and contextually correct but Hebrew scholars generally have preferred to see these as *promises* from God. As always, a promise from God will be set in the context of God's perfect will for every person in every situation.

“The LORD sustains him on his sickbed...” That last phrase of verse 3 is interesting. “You restore him to full health.” This Hebrew phrase literally translates, “You turn all his bed in his sickness.” This is a beautiful picture! When someone is bedridden for long periods of time, a loving caregiver will take the time and make the effort to change the sheets, turn the mattress over (e.g., a feather mattress), fluff up the pillow or do whatever is needed to make the person who is sick feel more comfortable. This is a picture of the most intimate and personal care and this is what God promises to do for those who “consider the poor.” Along with considering the poor, let's look at:

—Crying Out to God for Mercy

The next section of verses has the psalmist pleading with God in prayer. “As for me, I said, ‘O LORD, be gracious to me; heal me, for I have sinned against you!’” The word translated “gracious” is often translated “mercy or merciful.” This reminds us of Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy.” (Mt. 5:7) David goes from reminding us of God's promises to care for those who consider the poor and needy to inform us that *he, himself*, is in this category and he needs God to show “mercy” to him. The phrase translated, “heal me...” is literally “heal my soul” (e.g., KJV, NASB). Again, this Psalm is referring to all the healing that we need *both body and soul*. In the last phrase of verse 4 the Psalmist makes a direct connection between sin and sickness. It may be that David is referencing some personal sin that may be the cause of his sickness and the need for healing, but it doesn't, *necessarily*, have to mean that (see Psalm 147:3). It may also refer to the fact that any healing that's given by God *to his covenant people* clearly includes the need to have our ongoing sins regularly

forgiven. In other words, David knows that he's a sinner. Therefore, he's *not* crying out for mercy because he thinks he's *deserving* of mercy, but rather, he's showing that he's totally dependent on God for everything good in his life. If David is to be healed, it's God who has to heal him!

Although we can't know for sure, many scholars believe that Psalm 41 is *likely* connected to the time of the revolt of David's son, Absalom (see Psalm 3). We know from

2 Samuel 15, that Absalom was seeking to take the throne away from David. One way that he did this was to curry favor among the people by flattery. When people would come to the gates of Jerusalem to get justice, Absalom would pull them over to the side and say in effect, "The king has designated no man to hear you. If I were judge in this land then everyone who had a dispute would come to me and I would make sure he would get justice." By doing this, "Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel." (15:6) When Absalom decided to make his move against his father and take the throne, David knew that if he were captured by his son he would be murdered. He quickly gathered his followers and escaped just in the nick of time. Although David is the king of Israel, at this time in his life he sees himself as one of the poor, helpless and oppressed. We reflect the character of God when we "consider the poor."

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