

Psalm 38: The Misery of Sin and the Pull of God

Psalm 38 is an individual *lament* included as one of the 7 *penitential psalms* (6, 32, 51, 102, 130 and 143). Its superscription states in Hebrew: “A David of psalm, *to bring to mind*.” This Hebrew infinitive *lehazkir*, “to bring to mind,” also appears in the superscription to Psalm 70, a psalm that is replicated in Psalm 40:14-18. (Alter, *Psalms*, 134)

The ESV Study Bible editors associate “to bring to mind” with the “memorial offering,” the portion of the grain offering that the priest burns on the altar probably to “remind” God that the worshipper has consecrated *gifts from God*, to “remind” God of his grace. “To remind” may also refer to how the psalmist and those who read and pray this **Psalm 38** are “reminded” of God’s gracious nature and of fallen humanity’s desperate situation, “dead in trespasses and sins” (Ephesians 2:1). Here’s an observation from a famous Psalms scholar:

Since with God to remember is to act, this word speaks of laying before Him a situation that cries out for His help. (Kidner, *Psalms* 1-72, 153)

“To bring to mind” is the opposite of denial and all of its “cousins” — minimization, rationalization, justification, and outright deceitfulness. It may simply refer to the speaker’s intention “to bring to mind,” to face honestly his suffering and sin in his supplication to God and his need for *confession* and *repentance*.

1. What does **Psalm 38’s** *superscription* add to your understanding and application of it?
2. The opening verse of **Psalm 38** is almost identical to Psalm 6:1, a similar penitential psalm.
How would you describe his concern? What is he pleading for in **38:1**? How does he *address* God? What does he acknowledge about his suffering in **38:2-4**? What is the effect of his sin on him?
3. He continues to *lament* his terrible condition in **38:5-8**. How does he describe the cause of his suffering? (Be brave and ask God to point out any of that “cause” in your past or present experience.)

The *lament* portion of **Psalm 38** takes up verses **2-14**. *What distinguishes this psalm from other laments is this extensive section describing his suffering and its cause.* (Ross, *Psalms*, Vol. 1, 823) This is a graphic description of the smells, sensations, other sensory experiences of physical, emotional and spiritual suffering—experiences of sin and guilt. What images stand out for you?

This extensive lament is also an example of how Israel learned to survive and to be transformed as a people of faith. They learned to give authentic expression to the real experiences of life, to include “life as it comes to us” in their faith and worship. They learned to meet the hurtful dimension of life “head on,” as faith crises and faith opportunities. Laments like **Psalm 38** show clearly that *biblical faith, as it faces life fully, is uncompromisingly and unembarrassedly dialogic*. Israel and Israelites in their hurt have to do with God, and God has to do with them. (Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, pp. 67-69)

4. When and how has ongoing dialogue with God been part of a faith crisis/opportunity in your life? What role, if any, have Psalms played or are Psalms playing now in your dialogue with God?

After describing how polite, positive and grateful we think we have to be in personal and corporate worship, Brueggemann writes this:

...we are seduced into nondialogic forms of faith, as though *we were the only ones there*; and so we settle for meditation and reflection or bootstrap operations of resolve to alter our situation. By contrast, ancient Israel could face honestly and openly its predicament because it never doubted that the predicament could be handled in dialogue...[The faith expressed in lament] is a faith that knows that the honest facing of distress can be done effectively only in dialogue with God *who acts in transforming ways*. It is a remarkable combination of honesty and dialogue. Frequently, we are honest, but unable to be dialogic or, conversely, we are politely dialogic, but unable to be honest. Laments in Israel are both. Precisely this combination resulted in joy and newness, the forerunner of resurrection faith. (Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, 68-69, *italics are mine*)

5. As the psalmist pours out his complaint in **38:5-11**, what does he start to realize about himself and God? (Notice verse 9 and see also Exodus 2:23-25)

In **38:11**, what else does he notice? What does this remind you of in your current life and in the life of Jesus?

In **38:12-14**, what do you learn about his opportunistic enemies and how he handles them?

6. How does the tone of **Psalm 38** shift in **38:15**? How would you paraphrase **38:15** for yourself?

In **38:16-20**, what reasons does the psalmist give for his confidence/trust in his God?

Look back through the whole psalm and mark the words the psalmist uses to address God. What do you think is the importance of those words to the psalmist?

7. Psalm 38 concludes without our ever knowing exactly what the psalmist's sins were or how his dilemma was resolved. The bulk of it describes his chastening for sin, his severe physical problems, his burden of guilt, the estrangement of his friends, and the plots of his enemies.

It shows us how those who put their trust in the LORD may pray with confidence to be healed from severe chastening when they acknowledge their sin. (Ross, *Psalms, Volume 1*, 836)

How will you apply this psalm to your life?

Remember David's response when Nathan the prophet rightly accused him, "You are the man" (2 Sam. 12:7). If the message of **Psalm 38** can be summed up in one line, that line may be David's response to Nathan: "I have sinned against the LORD." These words make all the difference because God will not despise a broken and contrite heart, and he hears our cry, "God, be merciful to me a sinner." (Psalm 51:17 and Luke 18:13)

8. The LORD's desire to give and forgive shines through the darkness of **Psalm 38**. All seven of the penitential psalms (6, 32, 51, 102, 130, 143) have provided Christians throughout church history with reminders of the seriousness of sin, the need and means for confession and repentance, and the joy and freedom of forgiveness.

In these last 2 weeks of Lent 2021, may we each use these penitential psalms to *practice the spiritual discipline and grace of confession*. May our honest dialogue with God in confession contribute to our progress in awakening "on the spot" more and more to our *besetting sin patterns*.

And yes, we all have them. Which of these might be poisoning your relationships with God, yourself, and others?

anger, pride, vainglory, deceit, envy, greed, avarice, fear, gluttony, lust, sloth, acedia

Psalm 139: 23-24

Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if here be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!