

Psalm 38: Sin's Misery and God's Forgiving Grace

In the chaotic, complex misery of our human sin, God offers us forgiveness, giving us peace and rest. (Matt. 11:28-30)

How can God be just and fair and yet give us forgiveness we don't deserve?

And how could this psalmist be guilty and innocent at the same time? How does the resolution of this puzzle take us to the heart of the universe?

Psalm 38 is an individual lament included as the third of the seven penitential psalms, (6, 32, **38**, 51, 102, 120, and 143). In Christian tradition this grouping of seven forms a ladder of repentance. The ladder's first 3 steps are *fear of God* in **Psalm 6**, *sorrow for sin* in **Psalm 32**, and *hope for pardon* in **Psalm 38**.

Psalms 38's superscription states: "A David psalm, *to bring to mind*." "To bring to mind" (remembrance) is the Hebrew infinitive *lehazkir*. Current study Bibles associate "to bring to mind" with the *memorial offering*, the portion of the grain offering that the priest burns on the altar to "remind" God that the worshipper brings consecrated *gifts from God* to "remind" God to act out of His grace. "To bring to mind" may also refer to how the psalmist and those who read and pray **Psalm 38** with him are "reminded" of how sin causes suffering and how God's grace brings healing.

1. How is the speaker in **Psalm 38** like Job, and how is he unlike Job? Think of examples of *the misery of sin* in your own life experience and the experiences of others.

How would you describe the connection between sin and suffering? Comment on this statement: "Suffering is sin made visible."

2. The psalmist (maybe David) laments deeply the misery of his suffering in verses **38:1-12**. The psalmist echoes Psalm **32:3-4** with these descriptions of how grieved and worn out he is by the burden of his sin.

What *word images* of his physical, emotional and spiritual suffering stand out for you in the psalmist's graphic, extensive description in **38:2-14**?

What words does he use to describe the *cause* of his suffering? (**38:3-5, 18**)

These words help us ask God to point out that "cause" in our past and present experience. Especially in this penitential season of Lent, we ask God to point out our *sin*, our *independence from God*, how we are going our own way rather than living by depending on him in faith and trust. We confess and repent.

3. The extensive lament of **Psalm 38** is 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.” (Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms the the Life of Faith*, pp. 67-69)

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...(Brueggemann, 68-69)

How was Jesus both *honest and dialogic* in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross as he suffered and died?

4. As the psalmist pours out his complaint in **38:5-11**, what does he “bring to mind” about himself and God? Notice verse **38:9** and Exodus 2:23-25:

...the Israelites continued to groan under their burden of slavery. They cried out for help, and their cry rose up to God. God heard their groaning and *remembered* his covenant promise...He looked down on the people of Israel and knew it was time to act.

In **38:11**, who else does the psalmist notice? Think about what this reminds you of in your life and especially in Jesus’ life. How does the psalmist remind you of Jesus as he handles his opportunistic enemies in **38:12-14**?

5. Notice how the tone of **Psalm 38** shifts in **38:15**. Read this verse and then restate it in your own words.

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

Look back through the whole psalm and mark the words the psalmist uses to address God.

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. So, what is happening here with this psalmist who is both guilty and innocent?

The answer—ultimately—is a foreshadowing of the suffering of great David’s greater Son. Jesus felt every facet of the misery caused by

sins, though not His own. From the start of His public ministry he was numbered with the transgressors (Matt. 3:13-17); the shadow of the punishment for His people's sins fell upon Him. Verses 1-12 open for us a window supremely onto His sufferings, before they in some ways express ours. But then verses 13-20 open up for us the prayer of the Son of God as He cries out to the Father for rescue from bearing the burden of sins. Silent before Pontius Pilate (Matt. 27:14 cf. vv. 13-14), he cries out to the Father for vindication. Verses 21 and 22 are a final prayer of the sinless Son of God, a prayer that the Father heard and answered at the Resurrection. (Christopher Ash, *Teaching Psalms, Volume 2*, 92-93)

6. Our Suffering and now Risen Savior is leading us in this prayer of confession and repentance, **Psalm 38**. We repent in the name and sacrifice of Jesus who owns our sins and pays for them on our behalf. **Jesus is demonstrating his solidarity with us sinners as we confess and repent of our sin.** King David and all faithful Israelites *before* the Incarnation of the Son needed this hope for rescue. We also *after* the Son's crucifixion, resurrection and ascension may know with great assurance that we will not in the end be forsaken, but our God will come quickly to save us. **(38:21-22)**

Notice how the somber mood of our current broken world matches the mood of **Psalm 38**. God demonstrates his solidarity with suffering people through the crucifixion and death of the Son. And our lives are hidden in the Son's life so we are in solidarity with suffering people too. We are his hands and feet, his eyes, ears and mouth praying for the Kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven.

In his crucifixion and death, Jesus endured the pain and shame of human sin. (Sin is independence from God, separation from God, human autonomy that distrusts God and refuses to depend on and entrust life to His care.)

We state this in our **Apostles Creed**: "He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried." (BCP, 20)

We pray it in **The Great Litany**, "By your agony and bloody sweat; by your precious death and burial, Good Lord, deliver us." (BCP, 92)

We pray it in the **Collect of Endurance** on Fridays: "Almighty God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified: Mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the Cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord. **Amen.**" (BCP, 23)

"Come unto me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." (Matt. 11:28)