

Psalm 38

Office of Readings Friday Week 2

Along with Psalms 6, 32, 51, 102, 130 and 143, this is numbered among the penitential psalms. The psalmist has sinned (verses 3-4 and 18), but cries out to God not to leave him in such terrible physical and mental anguish. He assumes, according to the mentality of the time, that suffering is willed by God, and therefore must be a form of punishment for sin. He asks forgiveness, but insists that those who are maligning him are acting unjustly (verses 19-20). The title reads: 'A Psalm* of David, for the memorial offering', indicating its cultic setting.

Psalm 6 opens in the same way. The psalmist is not objecting against being rebuked and disciplined, but against the extent of it, expressed here in terms of anger. See the article 'Anger' in the Introduction.

The psalmist begins by describing his terrible sufferings. Compare the following:

Under the weight of your hand I sat alone.

– Jeremiah 15:17

The arrows of the Almighty are in me; my spirit drinks their poison; the terrors of God are arrayed against me.

– Job 6:4

He bent his bow and set me as a mark for his arrow.

– Lamentations 3:12

This psalm is unusual in the power of its description of suffering. As noted above, he assumes that his condition has its origin in his sin. Recognising that there is a providence governing our lives, the psalmist sees his condition as a 'punishment' from God. See the article 'Anger' for the change in perspective resultant upon the revelation given by Jesus into the nature of God.

The psalmist is feeling powerless. It is as though he is drowning in his grief.

Water closed over my head; I said, 'I am lost.'

– Lamentations 3:54

Do not let the flood sweep over me. Do not let the deep swallow me up, or the Pit close its mouth over me.

– Psalm 69:15

From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but bruises and sores and bleeding wounds; they have not been drained, or bound up, or softened with oil.

– Isaiah 1:6

¹YHWH*, rebuke me but not in your anger*; discipline me but not in your wrath.

²For your arrows have sunk into me, and your hand has come down heavily upon me.

³There is no part of my flesh* that is not wounded because of your indignation; there is no sound bone in my body because of my sin*.

⁴Yes, my guilty* deeds are higher than my head; they are a burden that weighs too heavily for me.

⁵My wounds grow foul and fester because of my foolishness.

⁶I am utterly bowed down and prostrate; all day long I go around mourning.

⁷For my back is burning with pain, in my flesh* there is no part that is not hurting.

⁸I am utterly spent and crushed; I groan because of the tumult in my heart*.

⁹YHWH, all my longing is known to you; my sighing is not hidden from you.

¹⁰My heart* throbs, my strength fails me; as for the light of my eyes – it, too, has gone from me.

¹¹My friends and companions stand aloof from my affliction, and my neighbours stand far off.

¹²Those who seek my life lay their snares; those who seek to hurt me speak of ruin, and think up treachery all day long.

The psalmist continues to describe his physical and psychological suffering.

He is confident that in spite of his sin God knows that his deepest yearning is for communion with God, and so he pleads for forgiveness.

Having described his sufferings, he spends the rest of the psalm speaking of how other people are relating to him. They are afraid of the contagion (miasma) that they would contract from contact with one with whom, in their eyes, God is obviously displeased. Compare the following from the Book of Job:

He has put my family far from me, and my acquaintances are wholly estranged from me. My relatives and my close friends have failed me; the guests in my house have forgotten me; my serving girls count me as a stranger; I have become an alien in their eyes. I call to my servant, but he gives me no answer; I must myself plead with him. My breath is repulsive to my wife; I am loathsome to my own family. Even young children despise me; when I rise, they talk against me. All my intimate friends abhor me, and those whom I loved have turned against me.

– Job 19:13-19

Others are not content to avoid him. They take the occasion to threaten and defame him.

The psalmist knows that it is good to put his hope in YHWH. Compare the following:

It is good to wait quietly for the salvation of YHWH.
It is good to bear the yoke in youth, to sit alone in silence when YHWH has imposed it, to put one's mouth to the dust (there may yet be hope), to give one's cheek to the one striking you, and be filled with insults. For YHWH will not reject forever.

– Lamentation 3:26-31

He has been good to those who now malign him, and he is resolved to stay good.

Only YHWH can heal him from the life-threatening condition in which he finds himself. He feels that he hasn't much time and ends with an urgent plea for God to hasten to his aid and free him from the physical and psychological pain that is crippling him.

¹³But like the deaf, I do not hear; like the mute, I cannot speak.

¹⁴Truly, I am like one who fails to hear, in whose mouth is no reply.

¹⁵In you, YHWH, I hope; you will listen to me, Lord, my God.

¹⁶For I am afraid that they will enjoy my fall, those who make fun of me when I stumble.

¹⁷I am on the point of collapsing, and my pain is ever with me.

¹⁸I confess my guilt*; I am sorry for my sin*.

¹⁹Those who are my enemies without cause are strong, and many are those who hate me wrongfully.

²⁰Those who render me evil for good are against me because I seek what is good.

²¹Do not forsake me, YHWH; O my God, do not be far from me;

²²make haste to help* me, O Lord, my deliverance*.