

“Pierced by Prayer”

The Six Psalms, Part 2

Psalm 38

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I. Pierced by Sin

The Psalms pluck our heartstrings, making us instruments resounding with heaven's song.¹ Through Lent, we are exploring ways six psalms (3, 38, 63, 88, 103, 143) pluck our heartstrings.²

Warning: we will be wounded.

- Psalm 3: We wake up in war.
- Psalm 38: We get wounded in war ("arrows" v. 2).

Immediate first aid is important to prevent our wounds from infection. For, as John of the Ladder urges, the enemy is sure to discourage us in our fall and distract us from prayer.

St. John of the Ladder. While an injury is still new and warm it is not hard to heal, but aged, ignored and festering ones are difficult to cure.... However with God all things are possible.³

Psalm 38 is a prayer of repentance: God will permit us to be pierced by sin seeks in order that we desire to be pierced by prayer.

¹ A "psalm" (ψαλμός; *psalmos*) is a striking, twanging, as in the chords of an instrument. John Chrysostom wrote, "If we keep vigil in church, David comes first, last and central.... All other men at night are overcome by sleep. David alone is active, and gathering the servants of God into seraphic bands, he turns earth into heaven, and converts men into angels."

² These psalms encompass the sorrows and joys of the Christian life. An interesting tradition claims that our guardian angel will sing these psalms over us at the Great Judgment. Praying these psalms puts our minds and lives in the light of that great day.

³ St. John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, second edition (Omaha, NE: Patristic Publishing, 2020), chap. 5. Kindle.

II. Psalm 38

A. What Psalm 38 Teaches Us about God

1. **God permits suffering as a call to repentance.**⁴ (v. 1–8)

Charles Spurgeon. By [the arrows sticking in him], he means both bodily and spiritual griefs.... God's law applied by the Spirit to the conviction of the soul of sin, wounds deeply and rankles long; it is an arrow not lightly to be brushed out by careless mirthfulness, or to be extracted by the flattering hand of self righteousness.⁵

2. **God is not indifferent to our suffering but desires our longing.** (v. 9)

3. **Only God delivers from sin.** (vv. 15–17, 21–22)

B. What Psalm 38 Teaches Us about Ourselves

1. **Sin kills us.** (vv. 2, 3, 5, 7, 8, 10, 11)

- a. Sin is the embodiment of death in our lives, for it turns us away from God and His life.

Patrick Henry Reardon. Whether physical, emotional, mental, or spiritual—or all of them together—what we suffer in this life are the incursions of death, and *death is simply sin becoming incarnate and dwelling among us.* (emphasis added)⁶

⁴ Henry Patrick Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, revised (Chesterton, IN: Conciliar Press, 2011), 73. Kindle.

⁵ Charles Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, chap. 38. Kindle.

⁶ Reardon, 73.

- b. Sin *wounds* (v. 2): “arrows have sunk deep in me”
- c. Sin *rots*:
 - i. v. 3: “No soundness [Alter: no whole place] in my flesh... no health [LXX: no peace] in my bones.”
 - ii. v. 5: “My wounds are foul [i.e., stink] and festering.”
- d. Sin *distorts* (v. 6): “I am bowed [Alter: twisted]”
- e. Sin *depresses*:
 - i. v. 6: “I am... brought to my knees [Alter: gloomy]”
 - ii. v. 8: “I am spent [Alter: numb] and crushed”
- f. Sin *makes anxious* (v. 10): “My heart throbs [Alter: spins around; LXX: troubled]”
- g. Sin *weakens* (v. 10): “My strength is spent” and “the very light has gone from my eyes.”
- h. Sin *isolates and attacks* (v. 11–12):
 - i. v. 11: “Those closest to me stand afar off...”
 - ii. v. 12: “Those who plot... lay snares... seek my ruin... planning treachery”

2. Repentance heals us. (title and vv. 18, 21–22)

- a. Sin turns us *away*; repentance turns us *toward* God.
- b. *Title*: “a memorial” = calling God’s attention to our need⁷ or calling to mind our sins⁸ (in order to repent and turn our minds to God).
- c. “I confess that I am guilty...” (v. 18), “Forsake me not!” (v. 21).

⁷ So the translation of the NET.

⁸ Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 211. Kindle.

III. Pierced by Prayer

The Psalms pierce the heart when prayed with feeling. Psalm 38 is punctuated with feeling. The Psalmist is pierced, pressed, depressed, drained, anxious, ignored, and harrassed. Recall that the Psalms are *dynamic*, not *static*. Prayer does not pull them into our world but pulls us into their world.⁹ Entering the prayers of the Psalms, pierces us with godly feelings.

Theophan the Recluse. Not every act of prayer is prayer. Reading prayers [like the Psalms] either by heart or from a book, or hearing someone else read them is not yet prayer, but only a tool or method for obtaining and *awakening* prayer. *Prayer itself is the piercing of our hearts by pious feelings towards God, one after another....* All of our effort should be directed so that during our prayers, these feelings and feelings like them should fill our souls, so that the heart would not be empty when the lips are reading the prayers.... When these feelings are present, our prayer is prayer, and when they are absent, it is not yet prayer.

The Psalms kill the passions and instill dispassion.

Nicholas Ruomas. The Psalter of David casts words like stones, crushing the passions like another Goliath.¹⁰

⁹ Reardon, chap. 1. Kindle. “[When I pray a Psalm], I am playing a part... in the larger and transforming drama of redemption. The paltry circumstances of my own existence are taken up, through this prayer, into the ongoing history of God’s people.”

¹⁰ Nicholas Ruomas, *The Psalter of David the Prophet and King with the Nine Odes*, trans. By Nicholas Roumas (Great Light Publishing Co., 2023), 6. Kindle.

Dispassion is not a suppression of feeling, but an undeterred direction toward God. The Psalms increase both our *desire* for God (v. 9) and our *indifference* toward sin (vv. 14–15).

A heart pierced by prayer is unlikely to be pierced by sin.

Lord Jesus Christ our God, have mercy on us and save us; for You are good and You love mankind. Amen.