

Learning to Lament

Psalm 38

Studies in the Psalms #40

© 2016 Daniel R. Hyde

THIS is a Psalm for sinners. Have you ever felt distant from God or that he was distant from you after you've sinned? Then it's a Psalm for you! Have you ever felt alienated from family and friends because of your sins? Then it's a Psalm for you! Have you ever felt depressed, sick, or burdened because of your sins? Then it's a Psalm for you! And notice how the title says, **for the memorial offering**, which can be translated more simply as, "for remembrance." It's a plea for God to remember his promises to us even when we are mired in sin.

But how can God do that? He's just and cannot just forget our sins! Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "No individual can repeat the lamentation Psalms out of his own experience; it is the distress of the entire Christian community at all times, as only Jesus Christ has experienced it entirely alone."¹ One of the beautiful truths of the Word of God is that just as Old Testament priests prayed for Israelites because they knew what it was to be in need of God's help, so too our Lord Jesus Christ, because of his true

¹ *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1970), 47.

humanity, prays for us. Your Lord prayed this Psalm for you. “But how, since he was not a sinner?” He took our sins upon himself so that it was as if he were a sinner. Jesus knows what it is to pray this Psalm. It was Augustine who said, “If we deny that these words in our psalm are the words of Christ, we should have to deny it also of that other cry, *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*”² And as we embrace our Lord for us in his Psalm we learn how to lament for our sins.

The Complexity of Sin

The first thing I want you to see here is what I hope is in an answer to what you’re asking right up front: do my sins lead to me struggles? David says, **there is no soundness in my flesh *because of your indignation*; there is no health in my bones *because of my sin*** (v. 3). Note, then, *the complexity of sin*. What I mean is that it’s not so straightforward. We like to think in linear terms and that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. But there is not necessarily a direct link from your particular sin to your particular struggle. But before you pop the cork in celebration, there can be a direct link. It’s not a necessary link but a possible link. I’m no gemologist, but think of it like light refracting through a diamond. Can you

² *Expositions of the Psalms: 33–50*, The Works of Saint Augustine III/16 (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2000), 150.

directly link the light ray that enters on that particular angle with the light ray exiting this angle over here? Not necessarily, but it's possible.

We know for Adam there was a necessary link. And because of his disobedience, sin has entered our world and brought death and suffering with it (Gen. 3; Rom. 5:12). Because our consciences, the devil, and the world are constantly condemning us with our sins, we often assume that any given sin is the reason for any given suffering. Job's friends all basically said the same this: because God is just what goes around comes around. Don't we hear that all around us with co-workers and neighbors as they talk about "bad karma?" Even Jesus' disciples asked who sinned to cause a man to be born blind (John 9). But Jesus said neither his parents nor he sinned. So not all suffering is the result of particular sin and not all sin automatically leads to particular suffering.

But it can. The Corinthian church was a cesspool and Paul says because of that some got sick and some died. Ananias and Saphira sinned against the Holy Spirit and died. David is saying here in Psalm 38 that sin can lead to depression, physical illness, but most of all, to feeling distance from God.

The Consequences of Sin

So let's explore some of *the consequences of sin* that the Psalmist experienced. Children, you all should know what a consequence is. For example, this past week I found a 4-year old coupon someone gave me for a free 1-pound box of See's candies. So the kids and I went to the candy shop and filled a box full of delicious chocolates! What if I ate every piece all at once? What kind of a consequence would I have? I would feel really sick, wouldn't I? In this Psalm, David is showing us that there can be consequences for our sins.

First, there can be a *physical* consequence: **there is no soundness in my flesh...there is no health in my bones** (v. 3). This is what we just prayed: "and there is no health in us." Notice why: **because of your indignation...because of my sin**. Look at verse 5: **My wounds stink and fester because of my foolishness**. The word David uses here (*iwweleth*) speaks of the fool who is flippant and does not take seriously what will happen if you sin by drinking too much, by staring at certain images too much, or at being around certain people too much. And verse 7: **For my sides are filled with burning, and there is no soundness in my flesh**. Perhaps he was suffering from a fever of some kind. Again: **My heart**

throbs; my strength fails me, and the light of my eyes—it also has gone from me (v. 10). Light in the eyes is symbolic of life and vitality. And back in 13:3 this image of the lack of light in the eyes was used as a sign of sickness and even death. Brothers, there are more and more studies coming out about the effects of pornography on the brain and the body. It literally saps you of life. Beware!

Second, there can be an *emotional* consequence. Listen to how David describes his emotional state in terms of heaviness: **For my iniquities have gone over my head; like a heavy burden, they are too heavy for me** (v. 4). Have you had that feeling? Like Christian in *The Pilgrim's Progress* there is a weight on your back. And this weight made the Psalmist feel **utterly bowed down and prostrate** and led him **to go about mourning...all the day** (v. 6) and to **groan because of the tumult of my heart**. (v. 8).

Third, there can be a *social* consequence: **My friends and companions stand aloof from my plague, and my nearest kin stand far off** (v. 10). That word **plague** is used of leprosy in Leviticus 13:3. Don't be surprised if your brothers and sisters in Christ feel awkward around you when you are in sin. They're sinners too and it might be a struggle to communicate. But, for those of you seeing another in sin, resist this

temptation and double down on your friendship. Help someone in spiritual need!

Fourth, there can be a *spiritual* consequence. That consequence is feelings of distance from your heavenly Father that he is against you. Listen to how David feels like the Lord is fighting him: **For your arrows have sunk into me, and your hand has come down on me** (v. 2). Then he goes on to say, **but for you, O LORD, do I wait; it is you, O Lord my God, who will answer** (v. 15). Why is he waiting? Because the Lord hasn't answered yet! Again he says, **do not forsake me, O LORD! O my God, be not far from me!** (v. 21) Why? Because he feels forsaken and distant! **Make haste to help me, O Lord, my salvation!** (v. 22) Why? Because the Lord hasn't helped!

The Confession of Sin

Now, going back to what I said at the beginning, the beautiful reality is that he who knew no sin became sin for us, meaning, the sinless Son of God in our true humanity took our sins upon himself and underwent all the consequences for our sins. He felt the physical consequences of sin as he carried that cross. He felt the emotional consequences of sin as he cried out for the cup of God's wrath to pass from him. He felt the social consequences of sin when he, the shepherd was struck, and all his sheep scattered. He felt

the spiritual consequences of sin in crying out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

And the easy way out for us is to think, “Well, Jesus did it all. Amen!” Yes, he did, but notice that there is still a practical reality of *the confession of sin*: **I confess my iniquity; I am sorry for my sin** (v. 18). In principle my life is hidden with Christ in God (Col. 3:1), but in practice I am still a sinner, even as a believer. “If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves, but if we confess...” (1 John 1:8–9)

Like David, when we are suffering the consequences of our sins, where do we begin? With the Lord: **O LORD, rebuke me not in your anger, nor discipline me in your wrath!** (v. 1) And at each new section of the Psalm he continues going to the Lord: **O Lord, all my longing is before you; my sighing is not hidden from you; but for you, O LORD, do I wait; it is you, O Lord my God, who will answer** (vv. 9, 15). And he ends with the Lord: **Do not forsake me, O LORD! O my God, be not far from me! Make haste to help me, O Lord, my salvation!** (vv. 21–22)

This is a Psalm for sinners because it teaches us that even in our falls God in Christ remains our faithful Father! Amen.