

Suffering is inevitable in a sinful world. We are often innocent casualties, caught in the crossfire between malice and malignancy. Evil runs rampant and we are its victims. Much of the suffering we endure is not directly related to any specific sin we commit. Job's intense suffering was the result of Satan's attack and not the result of his specific sin, even though he lived, as we do, in a fallen and broken world. God subjected Job to this mean battle with Satan precisely because he was righteous and blameless, a man who feared God and shunned evil.

Suffering is not always linked to our personal sin, but sometimes it is. Psalm 38 is about those times when we provoke the anger of God and bring down upon ourselves the consequences of our sinful actions. We are saints redeemed by the blood of the Lamb but we continue to struggle with specific sins that produce devastating consequences. Sin harms us physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.

This sequence of psalms has been building to this point of personal culpability. Evil, from every angle, is being dealt with in the context of worship. Psalm 34 celebrates the Lord's deliverance from all our fears and troubles. Psalm 35 calls upon the Lord to defend the righteous from the vicious attack of the wicked. Psalm 36 describes the beautiful side of evil and those who seek to subtly undermine and destroy those who fear God. Psalm 37 unmasks the superficial flourishing of the wicked and calls for the righteous to trust in the Lord even when the wicked appear to have the upper hand. Psalm 38 brings the subject of evil full circle and leaves it at the door of our responsibility. The apostle John admonishes us to pay attention. "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. . . .If we claim we have not sinned, we make him [Jesus Christ] out to be a liar and his word is not in us." In between these two lines is the truth we cling to, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:8-10).

Although Psalm 38's twenty-two verses are the right length for an acrostic the psalmist chose a style that contrasts with Psalm 37's acrostic artistry. Even so Psalm 38 is a "carefully expressed and structured poetic piece."<sup>1</sup> The movement of the psalm is circular which fits with the chronic nature of the suffering and a palpable sense of the tension between futility and faith. Psalm 37 helps the believer understand the meaning of Jesus' third beatitude, "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." Psalm 38 corresponds with the second beatitude, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted" (Matt 5:4-5).

*The Lord's Heavy Hand*

*Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger  
or discipline me in your wrath.  
Your arrows have pierced me,  
and your hand has come down on me.  
Because of your wrath there is no health in my body;*

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<sup>1</sup> Goldingay, Psalms, 538.

*there is no soundness in my bones because of my sin.  
My guilt has overwhelmed me  
like a burden too heavy to bear.  
My wounds fester and are loathsome  
because of my sinful folly.  
I am bowed down and brought low;  
all day long I go about mourning.  
My back is filled with searing pain;  
there is no health in my body.  
I am feeble and utterly crushed;  
I groan in anguish of heart.  
All my longings lie open before you Lord;  
my sighing is not hidden from you.  
My heart pounds, my strength fails me;  
even the light has gone from my eyes.*

Psalm 38:1-10

David opens the psalm with a plea: “Yahweh, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath” (Ps 38:1). And he closes the psalm with a similar plea: “Yahweh, do not forsake me; do not be far from me, my God” (Ps 38:21). He doesn’t have a hope unless the Lord let’s up on his anger and draws near in his mercy. Physical and emotional pain and suffering are linked in Psalm 38 to personal sin and iniquity. We are given the words to pray when we have brought God’s heavy hand down on us because of our sin and iniquity. We learn how to pray out our pain in repentance and how to defend ourselves against those who are piling on to take advantage of our condition. Augustine’s meditation reflects on how miserable we would be if we did not mourn for our sin; if worship and prayer did not compel us into the presence of the Lord, admitting our sin, begging for relief, and pleading for forgiveness.

What is impressive about this psalm is David’s description of his sin-induced suffering. He transposes his guilt into vivid images of physical pain. He is like a wounded animal hunted by an archer, God’s arrows have pierced him. He is feeble and frail. Every brittle bone in his body aches. His oozing wounds are filled with puss and they smell putrid. The heavy hand of God oppresses him and he is overwhelmed with guilt. His soul is utterly crushed. Shooting nerve pain runs up and down his spine. The state of his body mirrors the state of his soul. He cries out, “I groan in anguish of heart.”

This psalm is for the person who loves the Lord but remains in the throes of prescription pain-killers or internet pornography or substance abuse. This psalm is a necessary “tool” for believers who struggle with depression or anger or resentment or compulsive eating or road rage or racism or self-indulgence or any number of sins that continue to afflict the believer. All believers need this psalm. At times we need to own the grief that springs from our guilt. We suffer from the consequences of our sin. It is not the nastiness of the world with all its evil and injustice that troubles us so. It is rather our own actions. The primary concern in this psalm (and in the second beatitude) is not how the world has wronged us, but how we have wronged the world. “Blessed is

the person who is moved to bitter sorrow at the realization of his [or her] own sin.”<sup>2</sup> The word that Jesus used for mourning in the second beatitude was meant to convey a depth of sorrow, not a sentimental self-pity but a true brokenheartedness.

Psalm 38 corresponds to the Christian’s struggle with sin. The psalmist’s longings lie open before the Lord. His sighing and confession are heard by the Lord. He waits for the Lord’s answer to his groans and prayers. It is not difficult to see how the language of Psalm 38 relates to the believer’s struggle. He who has the firstfruits of the Spirit, groans inwardly, awaiting the redemption of the body and the consummation of salvation. The struggle with sin persists.

The apostle Paul distinguished between “godly sorrow” and “worldly sorrow.” He said, “Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.” He elaborated on the benefits of godly sorrow: “See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done” (2 Cor 7:10-11).

After we believe we continue to wrestle with our old sin nature and the consequences of our actions, but sin no longer has the hold on us the way it once did. We are free from the obligation to the sinful nature because of what Christ has done for us. “He condemned sin in human flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit” (Rom 8:3-4). Christ’s followers were never meant to struggle with sin *as if this transformation had never taken place*. But a painful tension persists between our old sin nature and our new nature in Christ. Psalm 38 and Romans 7 and 8 grapple with that in tension. J. I. Packer describes the tension this way: “Paul balances what the law has told Christians about themselves (“failed! weak! guilty!”) with what the gospel tells them about themselves (“loved! saved! safe!”), and his purpose is to ensure that the gospel rather than the law has the last word in his readers’ consciences and determines their final attitudes toward God, toward themselves, and toward life.”<sup>3</sup>

When we were controlled by the sinful nature we were unable to please God, but now in the Spirit we have the power to put to death “the misdeeds of the body” (Rom 8:13). Paul says all of this not to make wayward Christians feel guilty but to celebrate the power of Christ’s Spirit to break sin’s bondage and liberate us to really live. We are under a new obligation to live according to the Spirit. The negative tension (“For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing”) was not meant to dominant the person in Christ (Rom 7:19). The apostle Paul is not suggesting that sin is no longer a problem, but he is saying that the follower of Christ is not defeated by sin (Rom 6:12-13; 13:12-14; Gal 5:17).

Far from dismissing the relevance of Psalm 38 for the Christian, the theology of Romans inspires its value. In Christ, we have been liberated from the bondage of sin, nevertheless we continue to struggle with the complex consequences of having been given over to sin in the past and the impact of sin in the present. Addictions and attachments to false gods and sinful desires will not

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<sup>2</sup> William Barclay, *Beatitudes and the Lord’s Prayer for Everyman* (New York: Harper Collins, 1975), 33.

<sup>3</sup> J. I. Packer, *Keep In Step With The Spirit*. Old Tappan, New Jersey: Revell, 1984, 129

be eradicated from the believer's life immediately. It may take years of "people helping us in complicated and professional ways to undo the power of sin in our lives."<sup>4</sup> Alcohol addiction is a case in point. Richard Mouw explains that this addiction functions on three levels: (1) physically or chemically - the body thirsts for it; (2) psychologically - the mind and will compulsively long for it; (3) spiritually - the person makes it into an idol. What began as an individual decision has become a "multilevel and complicated disease because we're multilevel and complicated persons."<sup>5</sup>

The psalmist's understanding of Yahweh's covenant love corresponds to the apostle's description of the followers of Jesus as the beloved children of God whose lasting inheritance is secure. This frees us up "to cultivate the humility of knowing that I'm still a broken person living in a country of the broken and that God's sanctifying ways in my life are often seriously drawn out."<sup>6</sup>

Paul describes the believer's new self-understanding in relational terms. "For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.'" A whole new life issues out of this new family relationship. God is no longer the austere lawgiver but our loving heavenly father. We are no longer trying in vain to keep a set of rules. We are abiding in a relationship. Obedience is empowered by love, not fear. "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory" (Rom 8:14-17).

*Abandoned by Friends, Hunted by Enemies, Saved by the Lord*

*My friends and companions avoid me because of my wounds;  
my neighbors stay far away.  
Those who want to kill me set their traps,  
those who would harm me talk of my ruin;  
all day long they scheme and lie.  
I am like the deaf, who cannot hear,  
like the mute, who cannot speak;  
I have become like one who does not hear,  
whose mouth can offer no reply.*

*Lord, I wait for you;  
you will answer, Lord my God.  
For I said, "Do not let them gloat or exalt themselves  
over me when my feet slip."  
For I am about to fall,*

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<sup>4</sup> An Interview Richard Mouw, *The Life of Bondage in the Light of Grace*, Christianity Today, 12/9/1988, 41-44.

<sup>5</sup> Mouw, "The Life of Bondage in the Light of Grace," 42.

<sup>6</sup> Mouw, *Ibid.*, 44.

*and my pain is ever with me.  
I confess my iniquity;  
I am troubled by my sin.  
Many have become my enemies without cause;  
those who hate me without reason are numerous.  
Those who repay my good with evil  
lodge accusations against me,  
though I seek only to do what is good.*

*Lord, do not forsake me;  
do not be far from me, my God.  
Come quickly to help me,  
my Lord and my Savior.*

Psalm 38:11-22

As if the self-destructive consequences of sin and the heavy burden of guilt were not enough, the psalmist laments the absence of his friends. Everyone is avoiding him. His nearby neighbors are standing far off and his companions want nothing to do with him. The human tendency is to run from problems, especially our self-inflicted problems. The sufferer in this psalm admits to bringing down a ton of trouble on his own head. But isn't that precisely when we need the support of our friends and neighbors more than ever? Job didn't deserve to suffer, but he reasoned that even if he had sinned, he should have the support of his friends. He argued, "A despairing man should have the devotion of his friends, even though he forsakes the fear of the Almighty" (Job 6:14). Unfortunately, when we see a child of God suffer because of his sinful choices, we tend to think it is our place to show disapproval by withdrawing friendship and support. We want the sinner to feel our subtle judgment and unspoken condemnation. We justify our actions on grounds that we cannot act as if nothing has happened. This may be the natural response of our sin nature, but it is not the response called for by the gospel and the wisdom of Job.

Meanwhile those who hate the sufferer seize the moment to destroy him. This is the opportunity they have been waiting for. They can smell his sickly vulnerability. They don't care if he has done anything wrong, because they hate the sufferer without either cause or reason. They set their traps, talk of his ruin, and plot his downfall. Their lying accusations against him are based on his good works and have nothing to do with his sin. Enemies pile on, it's in their DNA, when they see him down, they only want to push him lower.

The response of the psalmist to both friend and foe alike is silence. Even if every fiber of his being wants to lash out at his friends and condemn his enemies, he insists on remaining non-defensive. He laments the pain caused by those around him, but he does so only before the Lord. He disciplines himself to wait for God's answer on the resolution of his sin, on his reconciliation with the Lord, and on the restoration of his life. Goldingay writes, "The Psalms expect people who have been wronged to say and do nothing to the people who have wronged them, and to that end they encourage them to speak forcefully to God about these people. The protest and lament

of the Psalms give people opportunity to express their anger, but to do so to God rather than to the people who deserve it.”<sup>7</sup>

David draws the psalm to a close by clarifying where the worshiper stands in relationship to his perilous state, his sin, his enemies, his quest for good, and most importantly his relationship with Yahweh. As far as the worshiper is concerned he is on the edge of the abyss, barely surviving and overwhelmed by his never ending pain. But his confession is unwavering. He expresses it in a simple declarative sentence: “I confess my iniquity; I am troubled by my sin” (Ps 38:18). He utters no excuses nor qualifications, but he insists that his enemies are out to get him, not because of his past sins, but because his only desire is to do what is good. The worshiper’s final plea gathers up the whole psalm as a prayer that prefigures the “Maranatha” prayer of the early church, which translated from the Aramaic means, “Come, Lord!” (1 Cor 16:22). The apostle John echoed this prayer in the Lord’s climatic promise, “Look! I am coming soon!” (Rev 22:7,12,20). The worshiper calls out to God, as Yahweh, my God, my Lord, and my Savior. “Come quickly to help me, my Lord and my Savior” (Ps 38:22).

Augustine could not help but see the suffering of his Savior in this penitential psalm. He sees the sinner’s vivid description of his afflictions corresponding to Christ’s experience on the cross. He who had no sin, became sin for us, and experienced in his own body and soul the pain and trauma expressed by the psalmist. His pain became the Lord’s pain. In fact, Augustine said, “It is exceedingly harsh and inconsistent that this psalm should not relate to Christ, where we have his Passion as clearly laid open as if it were being read to us out of the Gospel.”<sup>8</sup>

It is by no means far fetched to picture the Lord Jesus praying Psalm 38 as he contemplated the burden of our sin. The descriptive language of the psalm relates closely to Isaiah 53: “Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed” (Isa 53:4-5).

Augustine related the psalmist’s lament over the abandonment of his friends and the attack of his enemies to Jesus’ Good Friday experience. Those who should have been “near” to help and support, “stood afar off.” “He came unto his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God – children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God” (John 1:11-13). Augustine emphasized the greatest and most gracious irony of all: the very one who was without sin became utterly God-forsaken for our sakes and cried from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt 27:46; Ps 22:1). Jesus Christ became God-forsaken so that he could say to us, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you” (Heb 13:5; Deut 31:6).

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<sup>7</sup> Goldingay, Psalms, 547.

<sup>8</sup> Augustine, Psalms, 104.