



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

## Sometimes, the Problem Is Sin

Psalms 6, 38

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### *Introduction*

I previously introduced the seven psalms that, since the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD, have been collectively known as the *penitential psalms* (Pss 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130). I also noted that these psalms fit into the larger category of individual laments, alternately titled by James Mays as “the prayer for help of an individual” (Mays 1994, 21). To review:

- They are composed in the first-person style as direct addresses to God; they usually begin with an appeal to the Lord.
- They take the form of a petition.
- Each describes some trouble that shows the needs of the petitioner, typically described in terms of his relationship with God, others, and self. The psalm may include all three of these relational concerns, two of them, or just one.
- The petitioner often gives reasons why his plea should be heard; this typically involves an appeal to God’s character, the psalmist’s relationship with God, and the dimensions and implications of his predicament.
- His prayer will usually include a statement of confidence in God and a confession of trust.
- The prayer often concludes with a promise of sacrifice and/or praise.

One feature of these psalms is the use of sickness as a figure for affliction generally, especially the affliction of sin. Regarding that characteristic, I noted the following:

- Sickness is a type of personal trouble and a legitimate subject of petitions (cf. Jas 5.14).
- The biblical view of illness does not see it as only a physical problem where something is wrong with the body, but as a theological problem, an indicator that

something is wrong with creation because of the presence of sin (cf. Rom 8.18–23; Matt 9.18–22).

- Since death, humanity's final problem, is used as a figure for the ultimate consequence of unforgiven sin, it is reasonable that the illnesses that result in death are used as a figures for the sins that lead to the spiritual death.

These factors, especially those having to do with illness and sin, are at the heart of the reason these psalms are called the *penitential psalms*: they are pleas for relief. We should keep these ideas in mind as we study these psalms and seek to incorporate them into our pleas for relief.

### *Analysis of Psalms 6 and 38.*

I'll begin with three general observations. First, these two psalms are largely parallel; although Psalm 38 more elaborately expresses them, they share common themes and use similar language. Second, as previously noted, the sickness theme is present in both, again, more so in Psalm 38. Thus, both psalms are useful resources when we are dealing with illness. Closely connected is my third observation: it is virtually impossible to separate illness from sin in these psalms, an indicator that the psalmist, identified as David in both, was more concerned with sin than with illness.

Structurally, the psalms follow a similar course. Each begins with a cry for help (Pss 6.1; 38.1–3).

The initial appeal is then followed by an expression of despair at feeling isolated. Both express extreme devastation (6.2, 6–7; 38.4–8). Although he never completely loses hope in the LORD, David does wonder where he has gone (6.3; 38.9–10). He is especially concerned that he may never again be able to praise God (6.5).<sup>1</sup> His despair is also seen in the distance he feels from other people (6.8; 38.11–14).

Overwhelmed by his despair, David realizes that his only recourse is God (6.4, 9–10; 38.15–20). Everything, he says, rests with God (6.4). He is the only one who can grant victory over David's enemies (6.9–10; 38.15–16, 19–20). But he has lost all right to make any claims because of his sin (38.18). His complete trust, therefore, rests with God (38.21–22).

### *Reflections for Our Times of Trouble*

As previously discussed, because sickness is mentioned so much in them, whether as a figure for spiritual ills or as an affliction in its own right, these psalms can be beneficial when we face those times in our lives. Having said that, we should not lose sight of the fact that the subject is neither sickness per se, nor the reasons for it, but rather coping with being ill. In that light, we are impressed with how well these texts describe the devastation,

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<sup>1</sup> Mays notes that 6.5 speaks of "the finality of death." "For the psalmist, there was beyond death only the shadowy nonexistence of the underworld in Sheol.... In the view of life and death behind this prayer, the praise of God is possible and actual only within the sphere of salvation history and in response to it. One must be a corporate and individual participant in God's way with the people of God for praise to occur. Sheol lay beyond and outside God's way with his people. There praise did not occur. The point in this appeal is not so much that God loses the praise of the psalmist but that the psalmist loses God" (Mays 1994, 60-61).

despair, and depression that so often accompany being sick. Thus, the sentiments expressed become solid points of refuge we can hold on to when facing illness.

Turn, O LORD, deliver my life;  
save me for the sake of your steadfast love (Ps 6.4).

But for you, O LORD, do I wait;  
it is you, O Lord my God, who will answer....  
Do not forsake me, O LORD!  
O my God, be not far from me!  
Make haste to help me,  
O Lord, my salvation! (Ps 38.15, 21–22)

But, as valuable as they are as resources when we face illness, these psalms are about much more; they lead us to consider the nature and debilitating effects of sin. As we discussed before, it is impossible to completely separate sickness and sin in these texts. At the very least, they are intertwined, and, in fact, the sickness serves to illustrate sin and its effects. Psalm 38.3–10 illustrates:

There is no soundness in my flesh  
because of your indignation;  
there is no health in my bones  
because of my sin.  
For my iniquities have gone over my  
head;  
like a heavy burden, they are too  
heavy for me.  
My wounds stink and fester  
because of my foolishness,  
I am utterly bowed down and prostrate;  
all the day I go about mourning.

For my sides are filled with burning,  
and there is no soundness in my  
flesh.  
I am feeble and crushed;  
I groan because of the tumult of my  
heart.  
O Lord, all my longing is before you;  
my sighing is not hidden from you.  
My heart throbs; my strength fails me,  
and the light of my eyes—it also has  
gone from me (Ps 38.3–10; cf. vv. 17–  
18; 6.2–3).

It's evident that David feels the weight of sin and all that accompanies it. Notice that, in both 6.1 and 38.1, God's wrath is mentioned, for wrath is one of the results of sin (cf. Rom 1.18; 2.5, 8).

It is also significant that sin, left untreated, can work on a person in a way that affects him physically (which is *not* to say that a specific illness is always caused by a specific sin) (Ps 6.6–7; 38.4–10; cf. 32.1–4). Think about your own experience; have you ever experienced the sickening feelings that accompany a sin you've committed, and know you've committed, but for which you have not yet found relief? If so, you can no doubt identify with David in these psalms. If not, or if it's been a while since you have, you will do well to ask what that might indicate about your spiritual sensitivity (cf. 1 Tim 4.2).

But there is something these psalms remind us of where sin is concerned that is much more important than any of the above: the hopelessness of sin without God. From beginning to end, these psalms understand in a way that goes well beyond the kind of syrupy theology we often hear today that *sin cannot be removed without God's intervention* (Ps 6.1–2, 4, 9; 38.1, 9, 15, 21–22). Of all people in the world, it is those who have determined they are righteous who may have the greatest trouble fully grasping this truth (cf. Luke 18.9–14). Sometimes,

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we see this only when the gravity of a particular sin is forcefully impressed upon us (Ps 51.2, 4, 10–12; 1 Tim 1.12–15).

### *Conclusion*

I wrestled with how to conclude this study, but after reflection decided Luke 16 with its emphasis on our priorities and vision of God would be appropriate.

- Verses 1–9 relate the parable of the dishonest manager, the point of which is to teach us to properly use the things we have for God’s glory.
- Verses 10–13 connect the parable to the issue of faithfulness in little things as an indicator of our priority.
- Verses 14–15 tell us that, despite their claims to superior righteousness, the Pharisees were really mammon focused.
- Then, after some instructions on the Law that, when examined closely, also relate to priorities (vv. 16–18), Jesus tells the story of the rich man and Lazarus; one did not see his need for God and the other had nothing else on which to stake his life (vv. 19–31).

The rich man saw his sins—too late to be saved from them. We should study and use the penitential psalms to avoid making the same mistake.

### **Works Cited**

James L. Mays. 1994. *Psalms*. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. Louisville, KY: John Knox Press.

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