



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

## “I Am Weary with My Moaning”

Psalms 6, 38, 51

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*I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with my weeping. My eye wastes away because of grief; it grows weak because of all my foes.*

~ Psalm 6.6-7

### Introduction

Mention King David and almost immediately his worst mistake comes to mind. We're familiar with his adultery with Bathsheba, his orchestrated murder of her husband Uriah, and the series of adverse consequences his actions set in motion (cf. 2 Sam 11-12).

I suspect one reason his story resonates is because we have David's reflections on the event in Psalm 51. He throws himself on God's mercy (vv. 1-2). He confesses his sin and the fact that he understands its nature as primarily an offense against God (vv. 3-5). He prays for renewal, cleansing, and the restoration of fellowship with God (vv. 6-12). He then renews his commitment to God and exhorts others to do the same (vv. 13-19). Psalm 51 is so profound and so much a part of Christian thinking that some have suggested it "has been said in full or part more often in worship and devotion than any other Scripture" (Mays 1994, 197-198).

A psalm of such repute certainly deserves to be studied in more detail, but that study will be more productive if we study it against the background of other psalms of the same type. Since about the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD, Psalm 51 has been counted as one of seven penitential psalms (along with Pss 6, 32, 38, 102, 130, 143). In one sense, Psalm 51 is the ultimate example of the type; but closer examination of the other six psalms shows that it only touches on what some of the others develop in more detail. So, we are wise to step back and look at it in light of at least some of those psalms.

My approach here will be to introduce them by reviewing the lament psalm type generally and then focus on a particular issue that relates to studying the penitential psalms.

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## *An Individual's Prayer for Help*

To review the general category into which the penitential psalms fit, they are *laments* (cf. Pss 7, 22, 42–43, 61; etc.) (see my previous sermon in this series, “[Vindicate Me, O God](#)”). Since he finds that the word *lament* evokes a negative reaction and does not identify the central character of the penitential psalms, James Mays seeks to sharpen the description to aid understanding. He suggests we call these psalms “the prayer for help of an individual” (Mays 1994, 21).

As Mays analyzes them, the lament psalms have six components, though we should not read any breakdown of them as a “chart” of the categories since “there is no standard order or arrangement of these elements in the prayers.” Instead, “their composers combined the elements in quite distinctive and creative ways that make up the distinctiveness of a particular psalm” (Mays 1994, 21). Having noted that characteristic of them, we do find several common traits in the various prayers for help.

- They are composed in first person style as a direct address to God and usually begin with an appeal to the Lord.
- Their basic component is a petition.<sup>1</sup>
- There is a description of trouble that shows the needs of the petitioner, typically described in terms of his relation to God, others, and self. (A given lament may include all three of these, two of them, or just one.)
- The psalmist often gives reasons for why his petition should be heard, typically involving an appeal to God’s character, the petitioner’s relationship with God, and the dimensions and implications of his predicament.
- The prayer will usually include a statement of confidence in God and a confession of trust.
- A promise of sacrifice and/or praise may round out the prayer.

We can make a few other general observations about the laments. First, the prayers are very personal, not just in their use of the first-person singular pronoun, but in the range of requests and emotions they bring before God.

Second, the personal nature of the prayers means that they are also bold, often vocalizing requests that some modern readers find offensive (cf. Ps 137.9). But these are honest feelings expressed to God, not contemplated acts of vigilantism carried out in the name of God. And the boldness of the authors’ requests shows the nature of their relationship with God (we may have robbed ourselves of something important by a more sanitized approach).

Third, while the lament prayers touch on a wide range of subjects and needs, they are especially useful for dealing with the particular need of the penitential psalms, namely, confession of sin.

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<sup>1</sup> A by-product of studying these petitions and others we find in Scripture is to see how the things we pray for compare with the content of their prayers. My point is not to suggest that our petitions are inappropriate, but to ask whether they reflect a fullness and expression of faith that matches what we see in Scriptural examples.

### *An Important Metaphorical Feature: Sickness and Sin*

In the penitential psalms, it is typical for the penitence to be expressed in terms of sickness, though this is not as pronounced in Psalm 51 which touches lightly on the theme only in verse 8. But it is prominent in Psalms 6.2, 4–5 and especially in 38.3–8, 10, 17–18:

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....  
 My heart throbs; my strength fails me,  
 and the light of my eyes—it also has gone from me (Ps 38.3–8, 10; cf. vv. 17–18).

What are we to make of this, especially in view of the fact that these are designated as *penitential psalms*? Certainly, sickness is a type of personal trouble that is legitimately a subject of our petitions (cf. Jas 5.14). So, there is perhaps a literal meaning intended. But it is clear that the psalmists make a close connection between sickness and sin (e.g., 38.3–4, 17–18).

What will help us resolve this question is to notice that the biblical view of illness is somewhat different from what is common today. Illness is something that has gone wrong, but we tend to think of it almost exclusively in *physical* terms. Scripture more often views it as something that has gone wrong *theologically*, a by-product of sin's corruption of both human nature and creation (cf. Rom 8.18–23).

We see evidence of this in some of the accounts of Jesus's ministry. In Acts 10.38, Peter connects "healing" with "oppression by the devil" (the LXX uses the same word for "heal" [ἰάομαι, *iaomai*] in Ps 6.2 [v. 3 in LXX]). In Matthew 9.18–22, the "healing" that occurs is expressed with the word σῶζω (*sōzō*; v. 21); it is also used in Psalm 6.4, the context of which (vv. 2–4) makes it impossible to delineate a distinction between physical and spiritual illness (cf. also the context of Mark 3.4; 5.23, 28, 34; 6.56; 10.52; et. al.).

In the penitential psalms, then, what is most likely is that the idea of physical illness is a device that was understood to be part of "a rhetoric of affliction, a rich traditional convention used to depict the one who prays as a sufferer. It is less calculated to identify a particular predicament and more to characterize neediness and helplessness in the liturgy of prayer" (Mays 1994, 22). When we recall that Scripture consistently uses physical death as the figure to describe eternal separation from God (cf. Rom 5.12–21; 6.23; Jas 1.13–15), it

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makes sense that the illness that causes physical death would also be used figuratively to refer to spiritual maladies.

This should in no way be taken to mean that it is ever inappropriate to petition God for relief from physical illness, or even to question where God is when we suffer such affliction. It does mean that there is something bigger going on, something that we likely should focus on more in our petitions.

### *Conclusion*

One final lesson remains to be learned from the pairing of physical and spiritual illness: both have a way of reminding us of what is really important. The nature of sin as “fall[ing] short of the glory of God” (Rom 3.23), not just doing some bad things, and certainly not just doing fewer bad things than other people do, shows that it is a serious thing to offend God. As David correctly noted, no matter what human is the specific object of our sin, it is against God and him only that we sin (Ps 51.4). So, we appeal to God:

O LORD, rebuke me not in your anger,  
nor discipline me in your wrath.  
Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am languishing;  
heal me, O LORD, for my bones are troubled (Ps 6.1–2).

### **Works Cited**

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

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