

“LORD, DO NOT FORSAKE ME”

Psalm 38

Lent 3

March 24, 2019

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The Third Sunday in Lent marks
the midway point in this penitential season.

This year we have been addressing six of
the seven penitential psalms, starting with
the great confessional psalm 51 of King David
on Ash Wednesday.

Psalm 38 is listed among the penitential psalms
because of its confession of sin in
verses 3 through 5 and verse 18.

In our pew bibles it is listed “A Penitent
Sufferer’s Plea for Healing.”

It is also ascribed to King David and its
worship purpose is stated as being
“for the memorial offering.”

While no specific sin is named in this psalm,
the psalmist asks for mercy and help
from God because of the terrible sickness,
loneliness, and isolation he is experiencing.

Psalm 38 contains twenty-two lines
the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet.

Its language reveals it to be a carefully
composed prayer of lament.

The prayer expresses and captures the
anguished predicament of the sufferer.

The prayer is a compelling example of
the way sickness is portrayed in the psalms-
not as a clinical phenomenon but
as a personal experience.

The subject is not sickness but being sick
Psalm 38 makes a direct connection between
sin and sickness and understands
the sickness as the effect of God’s wrath.

The language of Psalm 38 is intense
and rapidly paced.

One biblical commentator notes, “On quick reading,
Psalm 38 may give the impression of being
a stream-of-consciousness outburst by
someone in distress”.

The psalmist’s words seem to tumble forth,
moving from God to self to others,
from petition to lament to trust
with little direction or order

Martin Luther, on the other hand, sees
a particular movement and structure
in this psalm.

Luther’s reading of this psalm focuses on
the potency of the law, that is, God’s “arrows” (v. 2)
which have embedded themselves in
a conscience terrified by sin

God is the anchor who aims arrows at the human heart.

The reformer is of the opinion that the psalmist,
that is David, is not a hardened sinner,
for if that were the case “the arrow would
glance off as from a hard stone,
as they do when they hit the smug and secure”.

Rather as a believer, David feels the heaviness of
sin and gives a visual description of
its effects not only on his soul but also
in his body and social relationships.

For Luther the secure or hardened sinner
does not recognize or confess their sin.

David recognizes his sin and claims
the consequences as his own.

Luther speaks of the penitential psalm as
providing for the need of true self-knowledge
and recognition of the sinful self.

In his own commentary on this psalm,
Luther writes, “But it is foolishness when
a person does not know oneself but imagines
one as altogether well... The arrow,
however reveals this foolishness.”

Those who say they have no sin deceive

themselves, says the Apostle in 1st John.
Our Hebrew spiritual ancestors were not
philosophers like the Greeks speculating
about truth, they saw truth or wisdom
through their life experiences.
The sociologist Peter Berger posited that
all people and cultures long to
“bestow meaning on the experience of
suffering and evil.”
No worldview has ever done this with
the thoroughness of our own Judeo-
Christian Culture.
According to Christian Theology,
suffering is not meaningless-
For God has purposed to defeat evil
through the cross so that all the savages
of evil will someday be undone.
God is accomplishing this not in spite
of suffering, agony, and loss
but through it.
So suffering is at the very heart of
the Christian faith.
It is not only the way Christ became
like and redeemed us, but it is
one of the main ways we became
like him and experienced his redemption
And that means that our suffering
despite its painfulness, is also filled
with purpose and usefulness.
We live in a time in which this ancient
idea of suffering’s “usefulness” is resisted
Psychologist Jonathan Haidt explains
that people who face imminent death but
survive often develop post-traumatic stress
disorder that may permanently debilitate them
The condition can leave them “anxious and
over reactive”. Liable to “panic or crumble
more easily when faced with later adversity.”

Research on stress shows that it is
generally bad for people’s health.
Stressors include death of a spouse or

a parent, separation and divorce, personal injury or illness, job loss, and financial reversals. Studies show that these can lead to depression, anxiety disorders, and physical illness, particularly heart disease.

Nevertheless, Jonathan Haidt maintains that there is empirical evidence for the ancient view that “people need adversity, setbacks, And perhaps even trauma to reach the highest levels of strength, fulfillment, and personal development.

Dr. Haidt relates a true story of a friend of his whom he names “Greg”

Greg is a young assistant college professor whose wife left him for another man, taking their two young children with them.

Greg faced years of legal expenses and fights over the custody of the children.

Eventually he won custody but then found himself a single parent with a full-time poor paying job.

He had no hope of finishing the book on which his academic career depended, and he worried about the mental health of his children.

But several months later, Haidt visited Greg and discovered that many people had rallied around him

He learned how his church helped him with meals and child care and strong emotional and spiritual support.

His parents sold their home and moved nearby to help him with the children.

And then, after relating all of this, Greg alluded to how in the middle of many operas there was a crucial aria, a moving solo in which the main character turned sorrow into something beautiful.

Haidt went on to relate how with the help of family, friends, and a deep religious faith, Greg rebuilt his life, finished his book,

found a better position, and experienced more joy from each day with his children than he did before the crisis.

Greg also said that the experience had “radically changed his perspective about what mattered in life.”

Career was now not nearly as important to him as it had been, and this freed him to be a much better father.

Also, he found himself “reacting to others with much greater sympathy, love and forgiveness.

He just couldn’t get mad at people for little things anymore, (Happiness Hypothesis, J. Haidt)

Johnathan Haidt points out that there are three benefits of suffering seen in Greg’s life that often appear in others lives as well

First, people who endure and get through suffering become more resilient.

Once they have learned to cope, they know they can do it again and live life with less anxiety.

Paul sums this process well in his letters to the Romans: “Suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character, and character produces hope” (5:3-4)

Second, suffering can strengthen relationships, usually bonding the suffers permanently into a set of deeper relationships or family ties that serve to mature and strengthen for years.

But the third benefit is perhaps the most significant-suffering “changes priorities and philosophies.”

Psychologist Robert Emmons has categorized peoples life goals into four basic areas: personal achievement and happiness, relationships and intimacy, religion and spirituality, and generativity or contributing something lasting to society.

People who invest much or most of their energy
into the goals of personal achievement and happiness
are the most vulnerable to the adverse
circumstances of life

Efforts to seek God, deeper relationships, and
the good of society sometimes can be directly
enhanced by suffering but our freedom
and comfort never are

And so trials and trouble tend to force us
out of certain life agendas and into others.

Haidt puts this in another way.

He says everyone operates out of a life story
that integrates the events of life into
a “coherent and vitalizing “narrative.

People who have never suffered are likely
to have more naïve stories about life’s meaning

Suffering forces people to put the pieces back
together and turn to God for help and meaning.

Beloved people of God,
suffering and sickness like the psalmist
experiences are part of life.

God is grieved at our grief and pained at our pain.

Like the psalmist, we are to bring our
sinfulness, sickness, and suffering to God

Psalm 38 offers believers like us the hope
that confession of sin and our conditions
serve as a basis for our appeal to God in prayer

This psalm enables us to combat and deny despair

“For in you, O Lord, have I fixed my hope,
you will answer me, O Lord my God.”

Psalm 38 provides a model prayer for those
who feel deep sorrow and pain and
express it to God and turn it over to God.

This psalmist ends with a final appeal to God
for help in the midst of their pain and struggles

Like them, we have a God who will not forsake us.