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Walter E. Keller

Valparaiso University

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Psalm 38

A Psalm of David, for the memorial offering.

(NRSV)

- 1 O LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger,
or discipline me in your wrath.**
- 2 For your arrows have sunk into me,
and your hand has come down on me.**
- 3 There is no soundness in my flesh
because of your indignation;
there is no health in my bones
because of my sin.**
- 4 For my iniquities have gone over my head;
they weigh like a burden too heavy for me.**
- 5 My wounds grow foul and fester
because of my foolishness;**
- 6 I am utterly bowed down and prostrate;
all day long I go around mourning.**
- 7 For my loins are filled with burning,
and there is no soundness in my flesh.**
- 8 I am utterly spent and crushed;
I groan because of the tumult of my heart.**
- 9 O Lord, all my longing is known to you;
my sighing is not hidden from you.**
- 10 My heart throbs, my strength fails me;
as for the light of my eyes—it also has gone from me.**
- 11 My friends and companions stand aloof from my affliction
and my neighbors stand far off.**
- 12 Those who seek my life lay their snares;
those who seek to hurt me speak of ruin,
and meditate treachery all day long.**
- 13 But I am like the deaf, I do not hear;
like the mute, who cannot speak.**
- 14 Truly, I am like one who does not hear,
and in whose mouth is no retort.**
- 15 But it is for you, O LORD, that I wait;
it is you, O LORD my God, who will answer.**
- 16 For I pray, “Only do not let them rejoice over me,
those who boast against me when my foot slips.”**
- 17 For I am ready to fall,
and my pain is ever with me.**

- 18 I confess my iniquity;
I am sorry for my sin.**
- 19 Those who are my foes without cause are mighty,
and many are those who hate me wrongfully.**
- 20 Those who render me evil for good
are my adversaries because I follow after good.**
- 21 Do not forsake me, O LORD;
O my God, do not be far from me;**
- 22 make haste to help me,
O Lord, my salvation.**

Psalm 38 is acrostic in Hebrew, and is one of the seven Psalms (6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143) regarded by the Church as penitential Psalms. Psalm 38 is the lament of an unknown author who seems to be suffering from a serious illness sent by the LORD (verse 2, your arrows) as punishment for his sins (verse 3b, because of my sin). His suffering is made worse by the indifference of his friends to, and the delight of his enemies at, his affliction. So he concludes with a cry for the LORD's help (verse 15, it is for you, O LORD, that I wait), and confesses his sin (verse 18).

The Psalmist's conviction that his suffering resulted from his sins against God is consistent with the belief of the times that sickness and ill fortune resulted from an individual's sin or evil, and good fortune constituted proof of God's approval of an individual's behavior. We are all aware of the many exceptions to this belief, but it is true that our sins can have physical and mental side-effects that can cause great suffering. God will sometimes punish his children to bring them back to himself (see Hebrews 12:5-11). When we truly repent of our sin, God promises to forgive us. He delivers us from sin's eternal consequences although he does not promise to undo all of sin's earthly consequences.

Prayer to accompany Psalm 38:

Lord our God, you did not forget the pierced body of your Son nor the mockery his love received. Do not abandon us, your children, weighed down with sins, but give us the fullness of your mercy in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Linger longer over verses 9 & 15:

O Lord, all my longing is known to you;
my sighing is not hidden from you.
It is for you, O LORD, that I wait; it is you,
O LORD my God, who will answer.