

You are Psalms

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PSALMS (SONGS OF PRAISE)

TRUST
IN THE
LORD *and do good;
dwell in the land and
enjoy safe pasture.*
PSALM 36: 3

PSALM NUMBER: 37

*A prayer of a penitent for the remission of his sins.
The third Penitential Psalm.*

1. Rebuke me not, O Lord, in thy indignation; nor chastise me in thy wrath.
2. For thy arrows are fastened in me; and thy hand hath been strong upon me.
3. There is no health in my flesh, because of thy wrath: there is no peace for my bones, because of my sins.
4. For my iniquities are gone over my head; and as a heavy burden are become heavy upon me.
5. My sores are putrefied and corrupted, because of my foolishness.
6. I am become miserable, and am bowed down even to the end: I walked sorrowful all the day long.
7. For my loins are filled with illusions; and there is no health in my flesh.
8. I am afflicted and humbled exceedingly: I roared with the groaning of my heart.
9. Lord, all my desire is before thee: and my groaning is not hidden from thee.
10. My heart is troubled, my strength hath left me: and the light of my eyes itself is not with me.
11. My friends and my neighbors have drawn near, and stood against me. And they that were near me stood afar off:
12. And they that sought my soul used violence. And they that sought evils to me spoke vain things, and studied deceits all the day long.

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13. But I, as a deaf man, heard not: and as a dumb man, not opening his mouth.
14. And I became as a man that heareth not, and that hath no reproofs in his mouth.
15. For in thee, O Lord, have I hoped: thou wilt hear me, O Lord my God.
16. For I said: Lest at any time my enemies rejoice over me; and whilst my feet are moved, they speak great things against me.
17. For I am ready for scourges: and my sorrow is continually before me.
18. For I will declare my iniquity: and I will think for my sin.
19. But my enemies live, and are stronger than I: and they that hate me wrongfully are multiplied.
20. They that render evil for good have detracted me, because I followed goodness.
21. Forsake me not, O Lord my God: do not thou depart from me.
22. Attend unto my help, O Lord, the God of my salvation.

The Psalms are songs of praise and cover a period of about 1000 years, from the time of Moses (ca. 1400 B.C.) to the Israelites' return from exile (ca. 450 B.C.). They deal with selected events of that period and provide us with the thoughts and feelings of those who went through the experiences recorded. After being made a Cardinal by Pope Clement VIII, Saint Robert Bellarmine, prepared for posterity his very own commentary on each of the Psalms. Enclosed are his interpretations on each of the Psalms.

PSALM NUMBER: 37

Explanation of the Psalm

1. "Rebuke me not, O Lord, in thy indignation; not chastise me in thy wrath." The penitent David prays to God not to punish him in his anger and his wrath, as the judge deals with the culprit; but in his mercy, as the physician does with the patient. See the beginning of Psalms 6, on the difference between indignation and wrath, where we make them to be synonymous; but we will make a difference, we would say with St. Augustine, that they who are condemned to hell "are rebuked in indignation;" and "are chastised in wrath:" but David prays to God to punish him for his sins neither in hell nor in purgatory; but here in this world. St. Augustine warns us not to make little of the fire of purgatory, as the fire there is more severe than anything one can suffer in this world. Another observation is, that though God's justice is taking here in the retributive sense, as well as in Psalm 2, verse 3, and Psalm 6, verse 1, still, in other places it is used to signify the zeal of a father angry with his children, not with a view to destroy, but to protect them.

**“Rebuke me not, O Lord, in thy indignation;
nor chastise me in thy wrath.”**

2. “For thy arrows are fastened in me: and thy hand hath been strong upon me.” Knowing that nothing is of greater use in obtaining pardon of sin than a full knowledge of the evil of it, and the deploring our misfortune before God; in this and the few following verses he mourns over the unhappiness that mortal sin brings with it. He says, then, “Rebuke me not in thy indignation;” for I know, from experience, how severe it is; for “thy arrows are fastened in me.” I have been scourged with many calamities by you for my sins; “and thy hand hath been strong upon me;” yes, “your arrows are fastened in me;” and not lightly, for “your hand hath been strong upon me,” to send them home, to drive them in deeper. By such punishments and troubles, he seems to allude to the death of his son by Bethsabee, the dishonor of his daughter, the murder of his son, his expulsion from his kingdom, and other troubles, which God, in his vengeance, poured upon them. Perhaps, by those “arrows” he also had in view those fearful rebukes he got from the prophet Nathan, 2 Kings 12, “thus saith the Lord God of Israel, I anointed thee king over Israel, and I delivered thee from the hand of Saul, and gave thee thy master’s house, and thy master’s wife into thy bosom, and gave thee the house of Israel and Juda. Why, therefore, hast thou despised the word of the Lord, to do evil in my sight? Thou hast killed Urias the Hethite with the sword, and hast taken his wife to be thy wife. Therefore the sword shall never depart from thy house.” Such a reproof for benefits conferred, and such threats, must have deeply affected David, and overwhelmed him with shame, fear, and sorrow.

3. “There is no health in my flesh, because of thy wrath: there is no peace for my bones because of my sins.” He describes the effect of God’s arrows, and says he is terribly confused, and cannot rest, while he brings to my God’s anger, and his own sins that provoked it. “There is no health in my flesh, because of thy wrath,” your angry looks, that are always present to my mind, make my flesh to grieve and pine away; for interior trouble has its effect on the body, makes it to waste, languish, and decay. “There is no peace for my bones, because of my sins;” the deformity and hideousness of my sin so confuse me, that I cannot rest, my very bones tremble.

4. “For my iniquities are gone over my head; and as a heavy burden are become heavy upon me.” He gives a reason for being so dreadfully confused when he reflects upon his sins, and says it is because they are so numerous and so great. As to their number, he states, “for they have gone over my head.” Have grown into such a heap, that they all but crush me, as one who goes into a deep river, so as to allow the water to rise over his head, is overwhelmed by them. In regard of their magnitude, “and as a heavy burden are become heavy upon me;” my sins, like an insupportable burden, weigh down the powers of my soul, it being beyond my strength to satisfy so great a debt. David’s sin was that of adultery, coupled with murder; and now, truly penitent, he sees the many aggravations of both. He had injured a faithful servant, in depriving him of his wife, as well as of his life; he had offended Bethsabee, whom he solicited to sin, and thus spiritually killed her; he had offended his own wives, by not remaining faithful to them; he had offended the whole kingdom, nay, even the very infidels,

by his bad example, for which Nathan said to him, “thou hast caused the enemy to blaspheme the name of the Lord;” he had, lastly, offended God himself, whose laws he had openly transgressed. Counting up, therefore, the number of crimes and offenses he had committed, and the number of persons he had injured by his sins, he could justly exclaim, “my iniquities have gone over my head.” The grievousness of the sin can be estimated from the circumstances. David put Urias to death; first, an innocent man; secondly, a most faithful man; thirdly, one actually in arms for him; fourthly, after committing adultery with his wife, he seeks to add to the disgrace; fifthly, because he sought to make the man his own executioner; sixthly, when he wrote to Joab to procure Urias’ death, he gave them to understand that Urias was guilty of some grievous crime, and thus he injured the man’s character. His ingratitude to God, however, was the blackest feature in the whole transaction. God has bestowed on him all manner of temporal and spiritual favors in the greatest abundance, made him a great king, an accomplished prophet, a brave general, endowed him with prudence, strength, beauty, riches, everything that the heart of man could desire; all of which contributed to aggravate the heinousness of his sins, and which he must have acutely felt when he exclaimed, “my iniquities, as a heavy burden, are become heavy on me;” and the reason why so few conceive the sorrow they ought for their sins is, that few look back upon them, and weigh them with the reflection that David did.

5. “My sores are putrefied and corrupted, because of my foolishness.” This applies to the time between the commission of the sin of adultery and the admonition of Nathan the prophet, more than nine months. It was after the birth of the child that Nathan reproved David, and, therefore, during the nine months, David put off healing the wound through penance. Meanwhile, a sort of veil of forgetfulness had been drawn over the wound, which prevented its being seen while it never healed it; the wounds, however; remained, began to “putrefy and corrupt,” and to become more incurable, which he now deplures, saying, “my sores,” not by the fault of the physician, but through carelessness and forgetfulness, “are putrefied and corrupted, because of my foolishness.” My folly was the cause of not perceiving them, and the same folly caused me to allow them to putrefy, and thus spread the foul stench of the scandal in all quarters.

6. “I am become miserable, and am bowed down even to the end: I walk sorrowful all the day long.” From the corruption and putrefaction of his sores he became “miserable and bowed down,” which can be understood in two senses, as regards the sin, or as regards the punishment. For he who sins grievously, especially against the sixth commandment, by the very fact becomes miserable, because he thereby abandons God, our supreme good; “bows himself down” to the earth, becomes like the beasts, and, therefore, miserable, very miserable, which is conveyed in the phrase, “even to the end;” namely, he is so miserable that he could not possibly be more so, or more “bowed down;” having given up the delights of the angels for the sensuality of the beasts. The expression, “to the end,” does not mean the end of life, or the world, or forever; but it means that he was so bowed down, that he could not be bowed down farther, as it appears from the Hebrew. As regards the punishment,

22. “Attend unto my help, O Lord, the God of my salvation.”

“Because thou wilt not leave my soul in hell; nor wilt thou give thy holy one to see corruption. Thou hast made known to me the ways of life, thou shalt fill me with joy with thy countenance...” Psalm 15.

END OF PSALM 37

17. "For I am ready for scourges; and my sorrow is continually before me."

And so he was scourged, slapped on the face, and crowned with thorns."

18. "For I will declare my iniquity: and I will think for my sin."

He will declare a sin he did not commit, but which he assumed to atone for; and "he will think," yes, and anxiously, how to destroy it thoroughly, which he did, "when he bore our sins in his body upon the tree." 1 Peter 2.

19. "But my enemies live, and are stronger than I: and they that hate me wrongfully are multiplied."

Accomplished when the chief priests, thinking they had succeeded, exulted, and insulted him as he hung upon the cross.

20. "They that render evil for good have detracted me, because I follow goodness."

Namely, when they said to him on the cross, "Vah, thou that destroyest the temple of God;" and also, "let him now come down from the cross."

21. "Forsake me not, O Lord my God: do not thou depart from me."

The very words our Savior made use of when he said, "my God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

the passage may apply to that also; for the man guilty of sins of this class becomes "miserable, and is bowed down" very much, by remorse of conscience, by fear of God's anger, and by the shame that so humbles and confounds him, that he has not the courage to raise his eyes to heaven. Both constructions of it can be united in this way. I am become miserable by reason of my sin, and the punishment consequent on it, and very much bowed down, because I have turned to carnal and groveling pleasure the face of that soul I should have fixed upon God; through shame, I dare not look up to heaven, and, thus humble and abject, I am forced to look upon the ground, and for all these reasons "I walked sorrowful all the day long," my conscience always reproving and accusing one; for what pleasure can the wretch feel once he becomes cognizant of his own wretchedness.

7. "For my loins are filled with illusions; and there is no health in my flesh."

8. "I am addicted and humbled exceedingly: I roared with the groaning of my heart." He passes now from his own sins to the general corruption consequence on the sin of our first parents, which was the original source of his sin in particular; and from such corruption he says that he is afflicted and humble, is continually roaring and groaning. "For my loins," the seat of sensuality, having shaken off the yoke of original justice, are constantly bringing forth sinful and dangerous desires, and are thus "filled with illusions" of the evil spirits, "and there is no health in my flesh," because nothing good is to be found therein," but, on the contrary, a nest of evil passions that weaken it; therefore, "I am afflicted and humbled exceedingly," because I am ashamed to have to say that I, a rational being, should not keep myself beyond the reach of such low concupiscence; and, therefore, "I roared," through grief, "with the groaning of my heart," which provoked me so to cry out and bemoan.

9. "Lord, all my desire is before thee: and my groaning is not hidden from thee." Having said that the groaning's of his heart caused him to roar; he now tells us to whom those groans were directed, viz., to him who "searcheth the heart," and knows "what the spirit desireth." "Lord, all my desire is before thee;" you, O Lord alone see the whole extent of my desires, which turned entirely on the being delivered from my evil concupiscence, that I may, at length, arrive at the Sabbath of perfect rest; and, on this subject "my groaning is not hidden from thee," similar to what the apostle writes, Rom. 8, "even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption of the sons of God, the redemption of our body."

10. "My heart is troubled, my strength hath left me: and the light of my eyes itself is not with me." He goes on describing the corruption of human nature, and says, "my heart is troubled," meaning the intestinal war between his inferior and superior parts; and adds, "my strength hath left me;"

for such is the weakness caused by the rebellion, that man must, whether he will or not, be subject to evil desires, and exclaim with the apostle, Rom. 7, "for, to will good is present with me, but to accomplish that which is good I find not." Finally, he adds, "and the light of my eyes itself is not with me." The same rebellion has not only caused infirmity of purpose, but also blindness of intellect. We often judge of things not as they are, but as they appear to us; however badly disposed we may be, as those laboring under fever think what is sweet is bitter, and what is bitter is sweet; and, therefore, he does not say, the light of my eyes is extinct, but, "is not with me; for the light of prayer and of understanding is in the soul, but being oppressed by our corruptible body and our carnal desires, we cannot make use of it; and, therefore he says, the "light of my eyes," meaning interior light, "is not with me," to guide me though it is really within me. It is there in reality, but not practically.

11. "My friends and my neighbors have drawn near, and stood against me. And they that were near me stood afar off." Having described the internal war that is constantly going on within man, he now speaks of the external war the persecutions and sufferings that are consequent on sin. He first complains of his friends and neighbors rising up against him; particularly in Absalom's rebellion; in which he was joined by a great number of David's friends and neighbors. "And they that were near me stood afar off," while some of his friends, such as Absalom and his companions, pressed in upon him to put him to death; his own servants and soldiers "who were near him," stood aloof and did not protect him.

12. "And they that sought my soul used violence. And they that sought evils to me spoke vain things, and studied deceits all the day long."

13. "But I, as a deaf man, heard not: and as a dumb man not opening his mouth."

14. "And I became as a man that heareth not, and that hath no reproofs in his mouth." All these are true to the letter, as may be seen in the Second Book of Kings, where, when Semei railed at David, called him the son of Belial, the invader of the kingdom, he bore it with the most incredible patience, and would not allow one of his followers to harm or even reprove him; and thus, it was literally true of him that "he became as a deaf man, that heareth not; and as a dumb man, that hath no reproofs in his mouth."

15. "For in thee, O Lord, have I hoped: thou wilt hear me, O Lord my God." He assigns three reasons for having been so deaf and so silent; the first is, because he considered it would be of more service to him to put his trust in God, than in any defense he could set up for himself. I was silent, "for in thee, O Lord, have I hoped." I paid no attention to all the false and idle abuse so heaped upon me; because I was conscious that you, who are the just judge, giving to everyone according to his works, and in whom I have always hoped, was looking at, and hearing everything; and as I did put my trust in thee, "thou wilt hear me, O Lord, my God," and deliver me from their "unjust lips, and deceitful tongue."

12. "And they that sought my soul used violence. And they that sought evils to me spoke vain things, and studied deceits all the day long."

Alluding to the council of the chief priests, anxiously seeking false witnesses to destroy him.

13. "But I, as a deaf man, heard not: and as a dumb man not opening his mouth."

14. "And I became as a man that heareth not, and that hath no reproofs in his mouth."

Literally applying to Christ, who first before Caiaphas, then before Pilate and Herod, set up no defense, but "like a lamb in the hands of the shearer, was silent," Isaias 53.

15. "For in thee, O Lord, have I hoped: thou wilt hear me O Lord my God."

An allusion to the same silence. He was silent before man, because he would not be silent before God, from whom he expected his reward, the salvation of his people.

16. "For I said: Lest at any time my enemies rejoice over me; and whilst my feet are moved, they speak great things against me."

Christ displayed the most unconquerable patience, for fear his enemies should rejoice at his want of it. "While his feet were moved;" while he appeared for a while to be weak and infirm, "they spoke great things against him, saying, "if he were not an evil doer, we would not have delivered him up to you." "We found this man perverting our nation."

7. "For my loins are filled with illusions; and there is no health in my flesh."

He says those things for his body, deploring the corruption of the human race, as if one would say: I am sick in my feet, my hands, and my stomach; the heart is speaking meanwhile, but does not speak of the pain itself suffers, but of what the members suffer.

8. "I am afflicted and humble exceedingly; I roared with the groaning of my heart."

He now begins to enter into the details of his passion, alluding here to the prayer in the garden.

9. "Lord, all my desire is before thee: and my groaning is not hidden from thee."

10. "My heart is troubled, my strength hath left me: and the light of my eyes itself is not with me."

The prayer in the garden, still alluded to, in which he asked "to have the chalice pass from him;" and he began to "be confused, to fear, to despond, and to be sad," and to feel the full force of his approaching passion; he would not have the strength and light of the divine consolation, so that an angel from heaven had to come and strengthen him.

11. "My friends and my neighbors have drawn near, and stood against me. And they that were near me stood afar off."

Fulfilled to the letter in Judas his friend, and the Jews his neighbors, when they laid hands on him. The latter was fulfilled in Peter, who followed him at a distance, and the apostles who fled altogether.

16. "For I said: lest at any time my enemies rejoice over me; and whilst my feet are moved, they speak great things against me." Another reason why he chose to be silent and deaf. It is better for me to have patience, and trust in God's assistance for fear, by getting into impatience, and returning malediction for malediction, God may desert me, and thus, "my enemies may rejoice over me;" may glory in my fall: "and whilst my feet are moved, they speak great things against me;" that is, I have much reason to fear my enemies would greatly rejoice at my downfall; for, "whilst my feet are moved," when they begin to totter, and I appear inclined to fall, (as was the case in his son's rebellion,) my "enemies spoke great things against me," threatening me, and predicting the speedy loss of my kingdom.

17. "For I am ready for scourges: and my sorrow is continually before me." A third reason for being silent and deaf before his enemies. My sins make me "ready for scourges," not only of the tongue, but also of the lash; because "my sorrow," which I richly deserved, "is continually before me." Or, if you will, because "my sorrow," that is, my sin, which is the cause of continual sorrow to me, never left my heart.

18. "For, I will declare my iniquity: and I will think of my sin." He assigns a reason for being prepared for the scourge, because I acknowledge and confess that I sinned, and thereby deserved it; "and I will think of my sin," how I may make sufficient atonement for it. A salutary lesson to the sinner to use all efforts to make satisfaction, and gladly to seize on every opportunity of exercising their patience, when God is good enough to give them the opportunity.

19. "But my enemies live, and are stronger than I: and they that hate me wrongfully are multiplied." Having explained the reasons why he thought proper to remain silent and deaf before his enemies, that by his patience he may propitiate the Almighty, he contrasts that patience with the malice of his enemies. He did not return evil for evil; they, on the contrary, returned evil for good; and yet they enjoyed life, they exulted and were strengthened, which are noted here by David, with a view of moving God to deal more mercifully with himself. "My enemies live, and are stronger than me;" I am humbled and afflicted, and yet bear everything as patiently as if I were deaf and dumb; in the meantime, "my enemies live;" are quite alive, and active, and exulting, "and are stronger than me;" have grown stronger and braver, and "are multiplied;" have increased in number "who hate me wrongfully," without any just cause or provocation. He, probably, refers to Absalom's conspiracy, who falsely persuaded the people that the king would appoint no judges but unjust ones, which he would remedy were he appointed king. Hence the people rebelled, and "with their whole heart follow Absalom."

Another explanation of the Psalm 37

20. "They that render evil for good have detracted me, because I followed goodness." He proves his assertion as to his enemies hating him without any just cause. "They that render evil for good have detracted me without cause, because I followed goodness." Most truly have my enemies hated me without cause, for the very people that most detracted me were those that "returned evil for good;" for instance, his son Absalom, and his minister Achitophel. Absalom had received many favors from his father. A short time before, his life, which he had forfeited by the murder of his brother, had been spared; and still he denounced his father as unjust and careless, telling those who came to the king for justice, "your case seems to be fair and just, but the King will appoint no one to hear you." 2 Kings 15. Achitophel, also, who was raised to the greatest honors by David, to be even his prime minister, forgot all and revolted to Absalom, and gave him most pernicious advice against his father. "And they that rendered evil for good have detracted me;" but they did so, "because I followed goodness," because I acted sincerely and honestly in everything, in striking contrast to their unjust and impious thoughts and desires.

21. "Forsake me not, O Lord my God: do not thou depart from me." "Attend unto my help, O Lord, the God of my salvation." From what he said he infers that God will protect him, and prays he may, and nearly repeats the first verses of the Psalm. God punishes, in his indignation and in his wrath, when he deprives man of his grace, departs from him as from an enemy, and leaves him among his enemies, without giving him the slightest assistance. Having said in the beginning of the Psalm, "rebuke me not, O Lord, in thy indignation," so he now says again in the end, "forsake me not, O Lord my God." Let not your grace desert me, for you are the Lord that made me, and the God that created me for yourself, the supreme happiness. "Do not depart from me," as from an enemy; but rather, as a father, "attend unto my help;" look with care to my assistance; you, "O Lord, the God of my salvation," you who are the source of my salvation, from whom alone I expect it, and in whom alone I trust. Such seems to be the literal meaning of this Psalm. However, as many of the holy fathers apply the Psalm to Christ, and it is possible that the whole Psalm was intended for Christ, we now give an explanation of it in that sense.

1. "Rebuke me not, O Lord, in thy indignation; nor chastise me in thy wrath."

Christ speaks for his body; the Church, and prays it may be freed.

2. "For thy arrows are fastened in me: and thy hand hath been strong upon me."

He says, he asks in justice for it, because he had taken upon himself the arrows of God's anger that were upon it.

3. "There is no health in my flesh, because of thy wrath: there is no peace for my bones, because of my sins."

He describes his passion generally, by reason of which, "from the sole of his foot to the top of his head there was no health in him;" and when he says, "because of my sins," we are not to understand his own sins, but those he made his own, that he might atone for them.

4. "For my iniquities are gone over my head; and as a heavy burden are become heavy upon me."

He says, the reason there was no health in him, from the sole of his foot to the top of his head, was, that the sins he undertook to atone for were so numerous and so grievous, that they rose over his head, and weighed him down.

5. "My sores are putrefied and corrupted; because of my foolishness."

6. "I am become miserable, and am bowed down even, to the end: I walked sorrowful all the day long."