

PSALM 37

1 *A psalm by David; for remembrance concerning the Sabbath. †*

2

O Lord, do not rebuke me in Your wrath, Nor chasten me in Your anger.

3

For Your arrows are fixed in me,
And Your hand rests on me;

4

There is no healing in my flesh because of Your wrath;
There is no peace in my bones because of my sins.

5

For my transgressions rise up over my head;
Like a heavy burden they are heavy on me.

6

My wounds grow foul and fester
Because of my folly.

7

I suffer misery, and I am utterly bowed down;
I go all the day long with a sad face.

8

For my loins are filled with mockeries,
And there is no healing in my flesh.

9

I am afflicted and greatly humbled;
I roar because of the groaning of my heart.

10

O Lord, all my desire is before You,
And my groaning is not hidden from You.

11

My heart is troubled; my strength fails me,
And the light of my eyes, even this is not with me.

12

My friends and neighbors draw near and stand against me,
And my near of kin stand far off;

13

And those who seek my soul use violence,
And those who seek evil for me speak folly;
And they meditate on deceit all the day long.

14

But I like a deaf man do not hear,
And I am like a mute who does not open his mouth.

15

I am like a man who does not hear,
And who has no reproofs in his mouth.

16

For in You, O Lord, I hope;
You will hear, O Lord my God.

17

For I said, "Let not my enemies rejoice over me,
For when my foot was shaken, they boasted against me."

18

For I am ready for wounds,
And my pain is continually with me.

19

For I will declare my transgression,
And I will be anxious about my sin.

20

But my enemies live, and are become stronger than I;
And those who hate me unjustly are multiplied;

21

Those who repaid me evil for good
Slandered me, because I pursue righteousness;
And they threw away my love as though it were a stinking corpse.

22

Do not forsake me, O Lord;
O my God, do not depart from me;

23

Give heed to help me,
O Lord of my salvation

A Psalm of David: for a remembrance of the Sabbath.

Aimilianos: As we can see from the title, Psalm 37 is «a psalm of David». In composing this psalm, David's intention was not to produce a work of history or literature, but to give expression to his religious experience. David tells us how he feels, what he experiences, what he sees within himself, how he understands his relationship with God.

In terms of its historical context, Psalm 37 belongs to a group of psalms that David wrote in the wake of some rather disturbing events, including adultery, murder, and political revolution. I am referring of course to his affair with Bathsheba, the killing of her husband Uriah (2 Sam 11:2-27), and the conspiracy of Absalom (2 Sam 15). Despite the appalling things he had done, David went about his business for an entire year without any idea that he had committed serious crimes. When, however, the prophet Nathan confronted him, he awoke to the terrible truth of his deeds, and said: *I have sinned against the Lord* (2 Sam 12:13).

This «psalm of David», then, is the poetic expression of David's repentance. The next element in the title is the phrase «in remembrance». It is related to the phrase «for inscription on a pillar», which appears as the title of several other psalms (i.e. Psalms 56-60), and indicates that they were to be inscribed on some kind of memorial stone, where they could be

seen and remembered. In the same way, Psalm 37 is intended to serve as a monument to David's repentance, a record of his experiences, a perpetual herald of his sins. Think of it as a kind of gesture, like that of a beggar who extends his hand to you, so that you see the thinness of his fingers, his ragged clothes, the sores on his skin, and consequently you feel sorry for him, and want to help him.

In the same way, David is exposing his pain to God, reminding God of the wretched state to which sin had brought him, but also all the experiences that accompanied his repentance.

There is some evidence that this psalm was sung (or recited) at the «cereal offering», which was a preparation for the blood sacrifice offered for the remission of sins (cf. Lev 2:1-16). When seen against this background, it's as if David is saying, «I open up my heart before You, O God; I am about to make the peace offering, the bloody sacrifice; accept the slaughter of this animal and the pouring out of its blood as if it were my own, for I spill its blood in place of my own, and burn its entrails in place of my own» (cf. Lev 1:1-17).

We can also see the phrase «in remembrance» as something related directly to the life of David. From this point of view, the act of «remembrance» is something that refers primarily to David himself: «I wrote this psalm so that I would always remember who I am. The fact that I confessed my sins does not mean that I am no longer the man I once was. Simply because I said to the prophet Nathan, "I have sinned", does not change who and what I am. In the same way, the fact that I have become a king does not change the fact that I am the son of a poor woman and a crippled father. I am still the man I was. If God wants to purify my heart, that is another matter; it is His business entirely».

David had come to realize that he was living in sin, that his life was not pleasing to God. Our problem is that we *fail* to come to such a realization, for we too are sinners. Were we to come to such a realization, our names would immediately be written in the book of life, for Christ came to save, not the righteous, but sinners (cf. 1 Tim 1:15). When they repent, sinners, publicans, and harlots enter very easily into paradise (Mt 21:31). But for the person whose pride and superficial piety prevent him from seeing that he too is a sinner, repentance is difficult, indeed impossible. Whether such a person will be saved is not easy to say.

What does it mean to be a sinner? It doesn't mean simply that I've committed a particular sin, but that my entire being, every aspect of my self, is entangled in sin, *for in sins did my mother conceive me* (Ps 51:7). From the very moment of my conception, long before I was born, before I ever had an opportunity to commit any kind of particular sin, I existed in a mode of fallen nature, in the fallen Adam, and as such I opened my eyes on a world adrift in evil and wickedness (1 Jn 5:19). Yet I am called to become a «second Adam», a «new Adam» (cf. 1 Cor 15:45, 47); I am called to become a spiritual man according to the example of Jesus Christ. Yet how can I possibly become anything when I don't know who or what I

am now? How can I become a «new Adam» if I've forgotten, or am incapable of seeing within myself, the active presence of the old one? David, then, wrote this psalm to inscribe within his memory exactly who and what he was. To be sure, this is a psalm that's worth reading and studying every day. If however we have not yet attained to the experience and self-knowledge of the psalmist, we should nevertheless turn to God and say: «God, this is what I am, even if I am still filled with pride and think that I am somebody important». All human righteousness — assuming for the moment that anything we have done could be considered righteous — is in reality a *dirty rag* (Is 64:6). This is something that we have not yet fully understood.

The phrase «concerning the Sabbath» suggests that Psalm 37 may have been read on that day. In the same way that there was an angel appointed to every individual (cf. Tob 12:12-15; Mt 18:10), it is not inconceivable that there was a particular psalm or psalms for each day of the week. The most probable interpretation, however, is the spiritual one, so that the «day» in question is the «Sabbath» of the soul, when it will cease from all its worldly toils and come to rest in God.

It follows, then, that this is not a psalm of consolation. It is not the story of a troubled conscience that finds relief after having unburdened itself. Christ did not come to provide us with that kind of temporary psychological experience. He did not come to deceive us. He did not come to hear our confession so that we might feel «relief». Christ came to rescue and redeem souls, to liberate us from bondage to sin, and to lead us to the rest of a new, eternal Sabbath. In this way, Psalm 37 is a prophecy concerning a new Sabbath — the «first of Sabbaths», as the hymns of Pascha say — in which the shadows of the law are overtaken by the light of the Resurrection.

These are the themes that emerge from the psalm's title. They enable us to understand something about the root meanings of repentance, and thus about the obstacles to repentance buried within us. As we proceed with our interpretation of the psalm, we shall see that, in addition to describing the obstacles to repentance, the psalmist presents us with a way to surmount them. This is a simple psalm, without any obscure phrases or difficult words. We hear it every day in our worship, for it is the second psalm of the «Six Psalms» read during the Matins. It is the prayer of the psalmist...

ATHANSIUS: When you feel the Lord's displeasure, if you see that you are troubled by this, you can say Psalm 37. ATHANASIUS ON THE INTERPRETATION OF THE PSALMS 15

REARDON: With its heavy emphasis on sin and suffering, Psalm 37 is one of the rougher parts of the Psalter, and its thematic conjunction of sin and suffering is also manifest key to its meaning.

Suffering and death enter into the world with sin. To humanity's first sinners the Lord said; "I will greatly multiply your sorrow," and "Cursed is the ground for your sake" (Gen 3:16, 17). So close is the Bible's joining of

suffering to sin that some biblical characters (such as Job's friends and the questioning disciples in John 9:2) entertained the erroneous notion that each instance of suffering was brought about by certain specific sins.

1. O Lord, do not rebuke me in Your wrath, Nor chasten me in Your anger.

Aimilianos: To «rebuke» means to «reprove» or «reprimand», but here the deeper sense is «to call someone to account», to «hold someone accountable», to answer for his conduct, to explain himself. Observe the humility of the psalmist. He does not say «do not rebuke me, O Lord; do not call me to account», but *do not rebuke me in Your anger*. It's as if he's saying: «I know I am guilty God, and that I must give an account of my actions, but let this not take place in anger. Rebuke me in Your love and mercy, as a father would his child. I am a sinner, yet I still feel within myself that I am Your son. You are the Lord and have every right to call me to account, yet I as Your child have the right to appear before You asking for mercy and love».

Lord, do not rebuke me in Your anger. «Do not deal with me in a way that is angry or vindictive». David knows the ways of the God, Who said *come and let us reason together* (Is 1:18). «Come here, My child, and let's talk it over. Tell me what you've done», says the Lord. «Enable me, O Lord, to know the depth of my soul, so that I myself might understand it. Ask me whatever You want, but not in anger».

Nor chastise me in Your wrath. The phrase *do not chastise me* literally means «do not strike me, do not beat me». Here too we see the beautiful way in which the psalmist thinks, for despite the fact that he has sinned, he does not feel that he has lost his boldness of speech before God, and so he asks Him: *do not rebuke me in Your wrath*. Even though I have fallen down and am lying in the mud, God does not stop being God. Even though I have many vices, God does not cease being virtuous. Thus I have the right to turn to Him, to approach Him just as He is. «This is what I am, this is what I have become. You, however, can't stop being Yourself; You can't be something You're not. Your love and goodness cannot change into something else, and that's why I'm turning to You». If a person has truly repented, he has no reason to fear being disappointed by God. Such a person might appear downcast, but in reality he looks to heaven, he sees God, and says: «Come here, my God, and let's talk; tell me what You want me to do».

Do not rebuke me in Your anger, nor chastise me in Your wrath. «The martyrdom that You will make me undergo, the punishment that You will inflict upon Me, is in essence a lesson, a form of education. It is the way in which You condescend to my level. I have sinned, and so I need to change, to grow, to learn a new way of living. I have made a mistake and I must be corrected. How will this happen? I must be *chastised, but not in wrath*. How beautiful! He knows that for himself it will be a chastisement, but that for God it will be an act of love.? The psalmist's petition that God refrain from any «wrath» is also a plea that the chastisement might be

brief, since wrath is something that endures over time. Anger boils over and becomes wrath, which takes a long time to cool down. «And why do I ask this of You, O Lord? Because I'm in such a state that, were You to be severe with me, I would instantly collapse».

REARDON: The present Psalm commences with a prayer for deliverance from divine anger...

THEODORET: [He is] asking to be disciplined in the manner of a surgeon, not a judge and to be treated not with harsh remedies but with mild ones.

AMBROSE: The prophet . . . acknowledges his fault, recognizes his wounds and asks to be cured. One who wants to be cured does not shrink from correction. Still, he does not want to be chastised in the fury of indignation but in the word of God. God's word is healing. As we read, "He sent his word and healed them." David does not want to be corrected in wrath but to be disciplined in doctrine. It is as though you were to ask the surgeon not to apply his knife to your wound but to pour in ointment. He begs for the remedy but not for the knife. There is pain but not beyond measure. The remedy stings, but the patient's blood does not flow.

COMMENTARY ON TWELVE PSALMS 38.19.

3. For Your arrows are fixed in me, And Your hand rests on me;

Aimilianos: The image of being struck by an arrow reflects the ancient belief that sickness and suffering were «arrows» sent by God (cf. Job 6:4; 16:3; Ps 89:5). This is similar to the belief that diseases were demons, evil spirits, which entered into a person like a poisoned dart or arrow. And so it was common to spit on such people — a practice which survives in the renunciation of the devil at baptism - so that the evil spirits might depart from them. «I have been struck in the heart by Your arrows; they have entered into the deepest parts of my being. Yet it is not enough that You struck me dead center, pinning me against a wall, but *Your hand has also come down heavily upon me*». It's like I've stuck a knife in you all the way to the hilt, so that my hand is in direct contact with your wounded, bleeding body. This is the terrible experience of the sinner, who feels just this sort of violent, crushing weight on him. And this pressure will not abate, for God will withdraw His hand only when He sees in us the fruits of repentance. Until then, I will suffer from the weight of His hand, I will feel the sting of His arrows, and I will drown in the crushing depths of a dark sea.

REARDON: Already the poet feels overwhelming pain which he describes, whether literally or by way of metaphor, in the most physical terms...

THEODORET: It is not without purpose that I make this supplication, he is saying; rather, it is because I see clouds of arrows directed at me, and your hand sorely threatening me and severely chastising me. The phrase, "you have fastened your hand upon me," he used by analogy with those tormenting and inflicting blows.

AMBROSE: We observe . . . that when Scripture speaks of "the Lord's hand," it refers to temptation that a person undergoes from the attacks of Satan. . . . When the devil wounds him, the arrows are the Lord's, and it is the Lord who has given Satan the power of hurting him. . . . There is, too,

that . . . reason why the Lord gives power to the tempter; it is so that one's love might be tested by temptations. That is why there are persecutions, so that faith may shine out and virtue excel and the inner thoughts of one's heart may be made manifest to all. COMMENTARY ON TWELVE PSALMS 38.21.

**4. There is no healing in my flesh because of Your wrath;
There is no peace in my bones because of my sins.**

**5. For my transgressions rise up over my head;
Like a heavy burden they are heavy on me.**

Aimilianos: If we focus on what is being said here, we'll understand something about the true meaning of repentance, and how it enabled a man who committed adultery and murder to become a great prophet and a saint, beloved by God.

There is no healing in my flesh in the face of Your wrath. In this line, «wrath» is personified; it has a face. In the previous verse, God's anger took the form of a deadly weapon, an arrow. Now it has become something like a violently angry person, bent on doing David harm. The very appearance of this pestilent creature banishes all health; it afflicts the psalmist's flesh, and makes all healing impossible. The psalmist may in fact have had some sort of severe skin disease. Some people say that he was suffering from a disease transmitted through promiscuous behavior. That however seems a bit far-fetched,¹ and the simplest explanation is that this is a metaphor; that a bodily condition is being used to describe an affliction of the soul.

There is no question that the psalmist has something else on his mind. Even if he is suffering from a bodily ailment, his deeper problem is spiritual, and it forcefully affects his whole person. Both his soul and body are in pain. He feels that for him there is no cure, no healing. «God's wrath has fallen heavily on me, it continues to afflict me, and so nothing can help me». In the Hebrew, the words «there is no healing» do not refer to a particular cure or remedy, but indicate that the whole person is unsound; that no part or member of the body is in a condition of health. «My whole body is a massive, bloody wound. Look at me, O God; examine me, and tell me if You find even the smallest part of me that is not wounded and infected. But You won't, since from head to toe *there is no healing in my flesh*.

There is no peace in my bones in the face of my sins. The idea that there is no peace in his bones seems to be, again, a metaphor for a spiritual illness. What he feels is the pain of sin. «Not only is my flesh suffering, but my bones as well. The pain has penetrated to the marrow, so great was my sin». Previously he spoke of the face of God's wrath, but now he casts the blame on himself. «Forgive me, God, for having spoken in the way that I did. It's not because of You, but because of my sins that I suffer like this. I'm at fault, O Lord, not You».

When a person repents, he becomes conscious of God's love. He does not despair, he does not become miserable, he does not become

downcast and depressed. He knows how to stand before God and say: «God, I'm wrong. Tell me what to do, not so that I might pay for my crime» - God does not demand such «payment» from us — «but so that I might be corrected, healed». David acknowledges both his sin and the righteousness of God, and so in these verses he simultaneously corrects himself and removes the burden of guilt from God, placing it on himself. «You are not to blame, O God. Neither is the cause of my pain something in my flesh, or in my bones. On the contrary, I am sick, and can find no peace because of my sins».

The majority of illnesses have their causes not in the body, but in the soul. We are sick because we have sinned. And we are sick, not because God is punishing us, but because sickness and suffering are necessary for our correction, for our education and growth. Sickness and suffering are the most direct and effective way for us to enter the kingdom of heaven (cf. Acts 14:22). Thus the person who does not see his illness as his best friend is in danger of remaining outside of paradise. The greater the illness, the greater . God's closeness to us, even if the illness has been caused by our sins. If sin is the cause of our illness, we must seek to correct the sin; our focus should not be on curing the bodily symptoms, but on correcting their spiritual cause. If our illness has its source in sin, then the cure, the program of therapy, will be different from the kind we apply when the illness is caused by other factors.

It is certainly possible that the psalmist is physically sick, but it is also possible that he is being consumed by anxiety and worries. «O my God, what have I done! I can find no rest; I cannot sleep at night, for when I lie down *I drench my bed with tears* (Ps 6:7)». How could a person in such a state not suffer? He couldn't eat. He covered his face with ashes. He did all this and more, not to «satisfy» or «propitiate» an angry deity, but in order to restore his relationship with the God of love. Thus he endured various hardships: he went without eating, without sleep, refusing to recline even on the ground. His bones ached. It's as if he's saying: «There is no rest, no peace for me. Even if I were to hasten to physicians, *there is no healing in my flesh*, for the cause of my disease is not in my flesh but in my sins. Thus the only way I can be cured is by the effacement, the rubbing out and utter wiping away of my sins».

With how much spiritual insight and nobility does David speak! Such compunction, such a deep recognition of his sin! Yet equally great is his effort to justify God. «My God, it is for You to live; for You to reign. If I am distraught over my sins, it is because they provide an excuse for men to condemn You. This is why I am sick. How can it be that I have tarnished Your glory? May this never be. Therefore I beg You, justify Yourself; prove to the world that You are righteous and just in all Your ways (cf. Ps 51:4)». With this we encounter the second characteristic of the person who repents. He does not repent simply because he himself has sinned or made some mistake. He does not repent simply because he has fallen, or lost something that he formerly had. He repents because his sins have

diminished God's glory in the eyes of men. This is the sign of true repentance; all the rest is mere remorse or regret. Most of our sorrow is not for God, but for our wounded vanity; our despair is merely egotism by other means. True repentance is a change of mind. What does that mean? It means that, whereas I was formerly looking at things in a human way, I look at them now from God's point of view. It means that I leave off thinking about myself, and think instead about God, and it is this change of mind that constitutes my transformation and renewal. The blind disorder that has risen like a dark wave between me and God, and which has diminished God's glory, must be expelled from my life by a flood of light.

My transgressions have risen over my head. These words also demonstrate the extent to which the psalmist recognizes his guilt. A moment ago he was speaking of his «sins» and trying to justify God. Now, however, he speaks of his crimes, his transgressions against the law. «My God, You are righteous, You are holy, but I am a criminal, a transgressors Seen from my own point of view, a «sin» is a mistake that I make, or something that I fail to do; it is my fall from grace. But a «transgression» is my fall as seen from the point of view of God. It is a crime committed against God. «I have transgressed* means that I have violated, desecrated, trampled upon, God's law. It means that I have placed myself above that law, and in so doing have stolen God's glory for myself. Thus «my transgressions, my trampling down of the divine law, my tarnishing of the luminous cloud — *have risen over my head*». This is a metaphor derived from the terrible power of the sea, as if rising waves were covering the psalmist's head, pushing him down into the depths of the ocean. He feels like he's drowning. «In this manner, my God, the waves of my transgressions have risen over my • head, and there is no hope that I can rise above them, no chance for me to make it back to land».

Like a heavy burden they press down on me. This is now a second image. «The water that has covered me is *like a heavy burden, pressing down on me* (cf. Pss 67:3, 16; 123:4). God's hand is heavy, and it has fallen on me with all its weight». In addition to the experience of drowning, of being submerged in the abyss of his transgressions, he wants to describe the feeling of being crushed, of a tremendous pressure on his soul, a heavy burden on his conscience. When he speaks of his sins, he says that *there is no peace in his bones*. When he speaks of his transgressions, he describes the crushing weight pressing down on his conscience. After this he delivers himself of an utterance still more remarkable, for it is the limit to which human self-knowledge can reach:

CHRYSOSTOM: If you wish to learn the foulness of sin, think of it after it has been committed, when you are rid of the evil desire, when its fires no longer cause disturbance, and then you will perceive what sin is.

HOMILIES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN 52.

AMBROSE: Now look at some lascivious (sexually driven) youth openly displaying his debauchery; his life is spent in love affairs; he lounges around like that rich man who was clothed in fine linen and purple; daily he

enjoys the most sumptuous dinners; his pavements swim in wine; the ground is covered with flowers and strewn with fish bones; and the dining room is filled with the perfume of sweet-smelling incense. He is perfectly delighted with himself and flatters himself that he smells sweetly. . . . He does not know that his soul is bleeding and festering, and he will not accept that his wounds are foul-smelling. . . . But the holy prophet David found for himself a remedy of everlasting salvation. For he freely spoke of his own wounds and confessed that his sores were foul and festering because of his foolishness. . . . This world covers up its wounds and does not show them to the Lord. Better the foolishness that has eyes to see its sores than wisdom that has not. COMMENTARY ON TWELVE PSALMS 38.30–31.

REARDON: Whether physical, emotional, mental, or spiritual—or all of them together—what we suffer in this life are the incursions of death, and death is simply sin becoming incarnate and dwelling among us, for "through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned" (Romans 5:12).

THEODORET: Pricked by punishment, he is saying, I remember sin, and memory of it arouses in me wailing and weeping; from these things ill treatment and misery come upon me.

6. My wounds grow foul and fester Because of my folly.

Aimilianos: My sores, my wounds, *make a stench*; they smell terribly, they reek. And not only do they *make a stench*, but they have festered, being suppurated and filled with vile pus. My entire being brims with pus. My skin, my body, is completely destroyed. I am repulsive to You, O God, loathsome and abhorrent. My soul is a stinking wound filled with pus. But even so, You do not turn away from me; You do not scorn me. *Though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me* (Gal 4:14)». In ancient times, the sick were often scorned and despised; they were considered disgusting and repulsive. Imagine, then, if from head to toe you were a horrible festering wound! With this powerful image, David is describing the state of his soul, the wretched condition into which he has fallen. This is not self-pity or self-centered display, but part of his search for a point of contact with God; for the beginning and principle of his repentance. «God, this is who I am. With brutal honesty I show myself to You. Now, show me Who You are».

No one can comprehend his sinfulness, no matter how great it might be, unless he has glimpsed the holiness of God. This is why David began this psalm by turning to the Lord of love and righteousness, saying: *Lord, do not rebuke me in Your anger, nor chastise me in Your wrath*. The «not» means «no longer», as if he were saying, «that's enough now, God. This anger, this wrath — this is not really You. I know that You are full of love. Don't appear to me now as something other than what You are®. Again, all of this indicates that the «chastisement» has already begun, and so he

says «*do not chastise me in Your wrath*. That's enough, God; reveal to me now Your true face».

Think about someone who is extremely angry with you, and who approaches you boiling over in his rage. Your first thought would be to get up and run away. You'd tell yourself that this person neither loves nor understands you. There's no point in sticking around; things could get out of hand. But look how differently David reacts! «My God, even though my bones are aching and my flesh is rotting away; even though I am a massive wound, show me Your true self; show me the One in Whom I trust. You are Holy. You are filled with love, tenderness, and compassion®. David's wretchedness stands in contrast to, and derives its meaning from, the love and holiness of God. In simple terms, if you've never seen the color white, you can't really understand black, just as you can't understand the darkness you're in, if you've never seen the light. This is exactly what happens in true repentance.

What is the deeper, underlying cause that keeps us from repenting? Now we have the answer: it is the simple fact that we have not yet come to know God; that we have not yet felt His holiness. And the reason we don't know God is because we haven't bothered to get to know Him. When you like someone, when you're interested in someone, you want to know everything about him. «Tell me, my dear friend, where are you from? Do you have any brothers and sisters? What is your mother's name? What was your childhood like?» And when he tells you all about his life; when he opens up his heart and tells you his troubles, you are moved to shed tears, because you've identified your life so closely with his. This is how we should love God, this is how we should desire to know Him. When we desire to know the love and holiness of God, then we will understand our sinfulness, and be moved to repent.

Consciousness of sin is your point of contact with God. This is the place where you cast your anchor, where you catch hold of something real. But I have no anchor to throw into the sea; no rope to tie me to the shore, for I have no sense of God's holiness and thus no sense of my own sinfulness. But as soon as I recognize that I am a sinner, that connection is made. The rope is tied and the ship of the soul arrives safely at the shore.

My sores make a stench and have festered in the face of my folly.

Sin and transgression are folly, indeed sin is the most foolish thing there is. *The fool said in his heart: «There is no God»* (Ps 14:1). To commit sin is the act of a foolish man, a man lacking in true knowledge and intelligence. «God, I am sick and wounded, but in essence I am a fool, and so I beg You to bend down graciously to me. I am not the rebel I appear to be. Yes my sin was an act of rebellion, a separation from You. But I did not have a disposition to sin; my aim was not to rebel. It happened because I wasn't thinking, because my mind was elsewhere, because I am a fool».

This is how David shows his humility. He lowers himself, and yet at the same time expresses his desire to remain close to God. «Don't hold this

against me, God, for it was done out of ignorance, foolishness». Whereas the word «folly» indicates the reason why he sinned, David's acknowledgement of that folly reveals that he does not cease to desire to be with God. And this desire is yet . another characteristic of the person who has become conscious of the fact that he has sinned.

A person in sin can easily repent. However, a person that has repented and then fallen back into sin has a serious problem. He sins, confesses, and then goes and sins all over again. There are also those that have lived a life of purity, who have come to know God, and then abandoned Him. But the first instance is more serious than the second.

**7. I suffer misery, and I am utterly bowed down;
I go all the day long with a sad face.**

THEODORET: The weighty burden of my sin cast me down, he is saying, the stench of my putrid wounds, which i sustained when I rejected good sense and became a slave to folly, also distressed me. This is the reason that I am bereft of all satisfaction, I grieve and am constantly sorrowful, and find no change in my distress.

GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS: The very best order of beginning every speech and action is to begin from God and to end in God. IN DEFENSE OF HIS FLIGHT TO PONTUS, ORATION 2.1

8. For my loins are filled with mockeries, And there is no healing in my flesh.

THEODORET: By reference to entrails [loins] he implies lust...So he means, My handling of desire not fittingly but wastefully proved the cause of these troubles.

9. I am afflicted and greatly humbled; I roar because of the groaning of my heart.

THEODORET: From the desire I garnered the fruit, which was my stooping to earth, he is saying, and constant bewailing on account of my heart's bitter pangs.

10. O Lord, all my desire is before You, And my groaning is not hidden from You.

THEODORET: For this reason I changed the force of desire and made it minister to the divine will...since once I used it wrongly, I shall always apply it to the benefit of your commands.

**11. My heart is troubled; my strength fails me,
And the light of my eyes, even this is not with me.**

THEODORET: Do you see my wailing and weeping, Lord, do you see me confused, deprived of strength, and bereft of accustomed light, living as though in darkness at midday? Now by these statements he implies two things, both the extraordinary degree of depression, by which the light

does not even seem to be light, and the deprivation of divine care, which he rightly called the "light of my eyes."

12. My friends and neighbors draw near and stand against me, And my near of kin stand far off;

13. And those who seek my soul use violence, And those who seek evil for me speak folly; And they meditate on deceit all the day long.

Aimilianos: «In their disappointment with me, my friends have removed themselves to the opposite corner, and they are powerless to help me. My enemies, who have sought and who continue to seek my life, spread vicious lies about me; they circulate groundless, malignant rumors designed to destroy me. They relish the fact that I am in trouble; they wish to see me far from God, so that they might laugh at me. And so they do not cease from their intrigues; their tongues do not cease from slander». Instead of they *acted violently*, the Hebrew says «they have laid snares for me». With their lies and their deceit they seek to trap me, to ensnare me, so that they can hold me down, prevent me from standing up, from repenting

THEODORET: Ahithophel [a traitor counselor of David] not only moved away but also came up with deadly schemes against him. Others, as is likely, did what he did—or, rather, the majority of Israel and even the very tribe of Judah waged war on Absalom's [David's son] side. Immediately after the killing of the parricide [relative], therefore, they urged one another to anticipate the other tribes and return King David to the palace.

THEODORET: Seeing me deprived of friends, the enemies continually hatched plots, longing for my slaughter.

14. But I like a deaf man do not hear, And I am like a mute who does not open his mouth.

15. I am like a man who does not hear, And who has no reproofs in his mouth.

Aimilianos: «But I paid no attention to their plots. Like a deaf man I ignored their hateful words. Like a man incapable of speech I made no response to them. I said not a word. I did not seek to counter their charges or argue for my innocence. I left it for God to judge them».

Recall the story of Shimei, who heaped curses on David, and yet David refused to respond (2 Sam 16:5-13). Such nobility! Such magnanimity! First, we see that the psalmist remains silent. To be sure, it is no small thing to be patient, to act as if nothing were happening, when others are slandering you, when they're digging a pit in which to throw you. If God wants me to descend into their pit, so be it. They seek my death, but I shall live in God. Second, we see that the psalmist has placed all his trust in God. Third, that he has self-knowledge. He knows that he has fallen, that he has sinned • against God. «God, I deserve this from them, for I have sinned against You, and so I leave all of this to Your judgment; I

allow it to unfold according to Your love. You can do whatever You wish. I however *will not open my mouth*».

THEODORET: History teaches this more clearly. Even when Absalom [his son] mounted a case against his father and drew to his side those who had lost cases in judgment, blessed David was long-suffering. When Shimei [supporter of His son who stoned and cursed him] berated him with voice and hand upraised, he took the abuse in silence; and he forbade Abishai [loyal son of his sister] to try and exact justice against the culprit in the works, "Let him curse me because the Lord bade him curse David." (Cf. 2Sam 16:9-11)

AMBROSE: The just person will want to conform his life to the image and likeness of Jesus, and though accused, he will be silent; if he is hurt, he will forgive. Wrongs done to him he will cover up, not opening his mouth. In this way he will be imitating him who like a lamb was led to the slaughter, never opening his mouth. Though he could have made an answer, he preferred silence to speech. For the Lord Jesus was silent when they accused him, and when they struck him he did not strike back. . . . You too, my friend, if you are given cause to answer back with a sharp rebuke, be silent. It will be better so. If you answer back in the same tone as your aggressor, it could lead to uproar and loud wrangling. Better to hide the injury done to you than, by arguing back, to gain some point or other. Good is the dumb person who knows not how to speak evil and from whose lips no injurious words can pass. Truly blessed is this dumb person, for inwardly he is saying, "Lord, give me a learned tongue when it is my duty to break into speech." COMMENTARY ON TWELVE PSALMS 38.45.

JOHN CASSIAN: You should walk as one that is deaf and dumb and blind, so that, putting aside the contemplation of him who has been rightly chosen by you as your model of perfection, you should be like one who is blind and not see any of those things that you find to be unedifying. Nor should you be influenced by the authority or fashion of those who do these things and give yourself up to what is worse and what you formerly condemned. If you hear anyone disobedient or insubordinate or disparaging another or doing anything different from what was taught to you, you should not go wrong and be led astray by such an example to imitate him, but, "like one who is deaf," as if you had never heard it, you should pass it all by. INSTITUTES 4.41.

16. For in You, O Lord, I hope; You will hear, O Lord my God.

Aimilianos: The Hebrew says «You will answer them, O Lord», which fits the context better, as David has just told us that he will *not open his mouth*. He hopes in God, not in arguments and rebuttals. «It is against You that I have sinned, and thus it is with You alone that I must settle my accounts. I have no business with those others. It is for You to deal with them, since in attacking me they also seek to attack You».

17. For I said, “Let not my enemies rejoice over me, For when my foot was shaken, they boasted against me.”

Aimilianos: «You will answer them, O Lord». Why? Now he explains: «*So that my enemies may not rejoice when my foot slips*. Do not let these men succeed in their plans. For if I am destroyed, if I die, if I am defeated, if I remain in my sin, they will rejoice over me, they will celebrate and broadcast their victory far and wide, boasting of my defeat. Yet my defeat will also be Yours, my God. So strike them down. Grant the victory to me, so that You might be the victor, for it is not me whom they shall conquer, but You».

THEODORET: But employing this patience, he is saying, I continued to have hope in you, to entrust judgment of me to you, and to entreat that I not become an object of rejoicing to the enemy nor my defeat prove an occasion of arrogance for them.

18. For I am ready for wounds, And my pain is continually with me.

Aimilianos: In the preceding verse, he was saying «they’ve got nothing against me, but rather against You, O God». Here he’s saying «I’ve got nothing to do with them, but rather with You, O God». And so «*I am ripe for scourging*. I’m ready for You to strike me». When he said earlier *chastise me not in Your wrath*, he didn’t mean «don’t punish me at all», but «don’t act in anger, rather strike me to the degree that is necessary for my correction, so that the crooked may be set straight».

The Hebrew says «I am ripe for stumbling», as if he were saying, «I’m ready to fall, my God; if You don’t act soon, I will be defeated, I will go down into the pit, with no hope of resurrection. I am on the edge of the abyss, at the door of Hades. Save me before I fall».

THEODORET: Sin made me deserve whipping, he is saying; hence I submit myself to punishment. I long for treatment at your hands, pricked as I am by the pangs of sin.

19. For I will declare my transgression, And I will be anxious about my sin.

Aimilianos: The word «for» denotes a certainty. It has the sense of fulfillment, verification. «Certainly, truly, I will confess my transgression before You and the whole world. I have no desire to conceal it. *But first restore unto me the joy of salvation, and I will teach sinners Your ways, and the impious will return to You* (Ps 51:14-15). Accept my repentance. Forgive me and show me Your love. Show Yourself to be the victor. Remove the threat, the presumption to victory, of the false gods, and then *I shall acknowledge my crime*, for it is then that You will be glorified; it is then that Your love will be more greatly valued, and Your glory more greatly esteemed. Then no one will doubt that You forgive sinners and save them. “Look”, they will say, “how God has used that sinner as His instrument. Truly He is a God of love, a God Who can be trusted (cf. 1 Jn 4:8; 2 Thess 3:3). What God promises to do, He does”». Thus the phrase I shall acknowledge my transgression expresses something essential, for it

means that «I shall announce, I shall confess my crime, my sin, so that the world will learn of Your greatness and Your love».

And take heed concerning my sin. To «take heed» means that I will do whatever is necessary to correct, to set aright, what is wrong; it means I will do whatever God tells me to do. Above all, to «take heed» means that something inside me is troubling me, eating away at me. This picks up on the earlier themes of a deep disturbance, an overwhelming dis-ease within his being.

THEODORET: Now for this reason I become my own accuser, and shall give full attention to my cure

REARDON: The proper response to sin and suffering? Confession of sins and the sustained cultivation of repentance, for "if we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1John 1:8)...Notwithstanding a widespread heresy that says otherwise, repentance (metanoia) is not something done once, and all finished; according to one of the petitions of the litany it is something to be perfected (ektelesai) until the end of our lives This sorrow for sin, says our psalm, is continual, ongoing (tamid). Every suffering we are given in this life is a renewed call to repentance. Every pain is, as it were, the accusing finger of Nathan [first child of Bathsheba]: "You are the man" (2Sam 12:7).

20. But my enemies live, and are become stronger than I; And those who hate me unjustly are multiplied;

Aimilianos: «I have sinned and am in danger of being destroyed, but my enemies are thriving and in control. Weak people will always be found who will side with the strong, for in their weakness they are drawn to power, being fatally enamored of it. And so, when the rebellion broke out against David, members of his own family and court sided with his opponents (2 Sam 15:12-13). «The number of my enemies increases; I am losing ground»

THEODORET: "Against you alone have I sinned, Lord," he says, "and done evil in your sight." (Ps 51:4) Those who often received many favors from me, however, repay me with the opposite, and gained better health than I.

REARDON: Finally there are the enemies. As I have insisted all through these meditations, the demons are the only enemies of the man who correctly prays the Book of Psalms. Nowhere does Holy Scripture exhort us to forgive or pity the demons. They are the only true enemies that our prayer recognizes. Unlike human enemies who are to be prayed for, the demons are always to be prayed against. Our fight with them is unsleeping, as is their fight with us, plotting our ruin:

21. Those who repaid me evil for good Slandered me, because I pursue righteousness; And they threw away my love as though it were a stinking corpse.

Aimilianos: «Those who pursue me, who seek to harm me, have continually spread lies about me». Why? «Because I pursued the good; because I sought justice. They seek to destroy me because in my kingdom I sought to enforce the law of God». It's as if he's saying to God: «Do You know why they're doing all this? Do You know why I'm in danger right now? It's because I love You and sought to enforce Your laws».

THEODORET: Once again he indicated Absalom [his son who rebelled] in this, calling his unjust judgments "calumniating." Since he was a son striving to become parricide [killed by a parent], it was right for the psalmist to add, "though I was beloved, they rejected me, loathed like a corpse:" though he should have been loved according to the laws of nature, he was disgusted with him as though a putrid corpse. Now this is relevant also to the ungrateful people, who though beneficiary of countless kindnesses from David, and thanks to him proven victorious oftentimes over foreigners, emerged ungrateful to their benefactor

22. Do not forsake me, O Lord; O my God, do not depart from me;

23. Give heed to help me, O Lord of my salvation.

Aimilianos: «I no longer feel Your presence. Do not leave me here all alone, O Lord. Even though I closed You out of my life, do not abandon me, do not forsake me. Even though I cast You out of my life when I sinned, do not remain far off. Though the door of my soul has closed, open it up and come in, so that I might embrace You once again, and place You within my heart. Come. *Hasten*. Run to me. Listen to the voice of my prayer, of my soul. Run, O Lord, *rescue me*, grant me salvation before it is too late». With this final exclamation, the psalm ends.

As you can see, Psalm 37 is a psalm of repentance. It is not yet a psalm of thanksgiving, since that takes place after the forgiveness of sins. But even though the psalm begins with a sinner in agony pleading *Lord, do not rebuke me in Your anger, or chastise me in Your wrath*, it ends on a note of enthusiasm, of desire, in the hope of sweet salvation.

The psalmist begins with his pain, from the wound of his soul, so that he might end by saying hasten to rescue me, O Lord of my salvation. The exposure of a wound is the first step in its cure. Such a gesture is the cry of someone who knows that God has already heard him, and will hear him again. «You will hear me, O God, for You are the One Who *heard* me and *saved* me».

David's heart is open to God, and thus he is not focused on himself. Someone who doesn't understand this psalm might read it and shed tears for himself, for his problems, for his frustrated desires, his difficulties, his miseries. But that's what happens when you concentrate too much on your self. David, however, is a spiritual man, and self-pity is not the same thing as spirituality.

The soul, in its agonizing search for God, passes through many stages, looking for God in places of darkness and light, places in which God is hidden and revealed. These stages are evident in Psalm 37, which is the

story of every soul that knows itself to be God's creation, something that God has fashioned with His own hands, *for we are indeed His offspring* (Acts 17:28). Psalm 37 presents the soul's struggle as a drama. But the real drama, the real tragedy, is to live in ignorance concerning the state of our soul; to fail to attain self-knowledge, which alone can make us say with Saint Paul, *Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?* (Rom 7:24). Apart from this, there is no greater tragedy. *Wretched man that I am*, says Paul, yet right after this he gives glory to God, Who has delivered him from sin and death. In order to move in the direction of your deliverance, you have to have a sense of your own tragedy. To find the cure, you have to understand the sickness in your soul, and so turn to God, Who is life, and health, and holiness. This is not the sort of tragedy in which a *deus ex machina* will be of any use. You need the one, true God, Who is the Lord of your salvation.

When the soul attempts to repent, when it begins to desire and feel repentance, it will immediately be struck as if by shock waves. It will feel as if it were about to fall, to be lost, obliterated. As if a great hurricane were sweeping through the soul, everything will be uprooted, moved about, and rearranged according to a new pattern. This is one of the most difficult things you will ever experience. At one point you may feel pain, not only in your soul but in your body as well. The whole self will come under a kind of pressure. And what is this pressure? It is my participation in the pain of God. It is my experience of God's thirst for me. It is the pain of God's running, His loss of breath, as He hastens to rescue me before I collapse and fall into the pit.

The pain that I feel, this tearing into pieces of my being, is the response of my soul to the activity of God, to his efforts to save me. Yet this response, this process, is liable to break down because the soul is weak. If things in the environment work against it, if the people around it create problems (usually as the result of our own egotism), then the experience of pain we're talking about subsides and gives way to another feeling, like the swinging of a pendulum. First we say «yes» to God, but then we say «no». We draw near to God, and then we abandon Him. We may give something to God, but then, after a while, we take it all back. *Behold the servant of the Lord* (cf. Lk 1:38) we like to say, but then our ego reasserts itself, and we return to serving our self.

Throughout our life, we go through many changes, experience many ups and downs. Today we are *children of the light* (cf. Jn 12:36), but tomorrow we are filled with doubts and wonder: «Who is God? Where is God? God has forgotten me». This happens because the ego has placed itself in opposition to God, has made a god of itself, and it is impossible for the two to coexist. The presence of one requires the absence of the other. It's as if two mighty gods, the God of my salvation and the god I have made out of my self, have come into conflict. If the ego wins, I will experience psychological isolation, which will include isolation from those around me, along with feelings of bitterness and sorrow. These feelings are the proof

that the ego has rejected the God of salvation. The «ego» — taken to include body, soul, and spirit — has sent God into exile. Before this happens I am locked in a struggle with God, and woe to me if I should win. This marks a critical juncture in my life, for it is the moment when I will have to utter a definitive «yes» or «no» to God. This is the moment when all the conflicts and cross-pressures in the soul, when all the contradictions in my life, rise to their most critical levels. If I say «yes», choosing to reaffirm my ego, I will begin to sink and be lost. If I say «no», it will be as if I returned to life, as if I were resurrected, redeemed. In essence, the ego is a king who is fated to suffer regicide; who is condemned to die and be buried in the ground. Yet my real death consists in the survival of my ego. And this will lead to something even worse, for my life will be one of endless anxiety and despair. I will suffer eternally in the hell of my inner division, for I will forever call upon God and forever reject Him. I will find myself in a place where I shall no longer be able to repent.

If, however, I am victorious; if I decide to put my ego to death, then the *king of Glory* will rise from the dead (Ps 23:7), the *Lord of my salvation* (Ps 87:1; Is 38:20), *for whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it* (Mt 16:24). The darkness of my isolation will be dispersed by the light of God, and He Himself will be my companion; He will grant me genuine spiritual life, which is something greater than my life, *for it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me* (Gal 2:20). I shall discover that Christ lives in me. His experiences shall become mine. This is the goal of my struggling; this is why I wrestle with God. And it is not just my struggle, but the struggle of every soul, and of the Church as a whole.

This psalm was not sung by a soloist, but by the entire congregation in a single voice; it is the cry of the whole Church. And whereas the Church herself is holy, her members, her children, fall every day into sin. And so every day the Church mediates between heaven and earth, by means of prayers offered at the altar, and by the prayers of consecrated individuals who like pillars support and uphold the universe. The Church experiences and prays for its fallen members; it participates in all their struggles against the powers of darkness. And it will do so until this struggle comes to an end, when the Church will no longer live *like the woman who fled into the wilderness* (Rev 12:6), but will be *the queen, standing at the right hand of God, arrayed in gold-fringed garments* (cf. Ps 44:10-11).

Finally, this psalm is also the cry of God Himself, the crying out of the Word of God, Who descended from heaven and became man for our salvation. Consequently, this psalm has a messianic dimension; it is a prophecy concerning the life and work of Christ. As we said a moment ago, the phrase «concerning the Sabbath» is a reference to the «new Sabbath», the eternal day of rest that the Lord has prepared for us. Rest, however, presupposes a period of hard work. And so Christ was slandered, scourged, and mocked; the arrows of God were fastened

deeply within Him. Evil men plotted against Him, hating him without cause. He was abandoned by His friends and neighbors, and in the end there remained with him only a handful of women who looked on him from afar. In some versions of Psalm 37, instead of the words *Those who pay me back evil for good*, which appear at verse 21, it says: *They cast me out, the beloved, as a corpse to be despised*. This is the voice of the suffering Christ, the Beloved of elect souls, of the holy angels, of God the Father, Who was cast out, sentenced to death, and abandoned as a loathsome corpse.

«My victory is Your victory», David says to the Lord, «and my defeat, which is my sin, is likewise a loss for Your glory, for it interrupts the advance of Your glory in the hearts of men». It follows, then, that when we don't repent, when we have no awareness of our sin, when we are without tears, when we are content to lie in the muck of our sins, we implicate God Himself in our fall. Have we sinned? Do we remain in our sin? If so, then He cries out: «They cast me out, the beloved, as a corpse to be despised».

When I reject the way of repentance, I reject God. When I choose to remain in sin, I expel God from my heart. But as soon as I turn from my sin, God enters my heart. And when He does, I discover my place in the Church, which is His body and His bride.

AMBROSE: Lord, you heal and are not polluted; you help and are not contaminated; for you are a God who saves. Your hands, O Lord, do not lose those that are your own but heal them. COMMENTARY ON TWELVE PSALMS 38.57.

THEODORET: Washed about with so many griefs, he is saying, I beseech you, my God and Lord, not to deprive me of your customary providence, but allow me to share in your grace and grant me salvation.

AUGUSTINE: This is the salvation the prophets sought to discover, as the apostle Peter says. They did not receive what they sought, but they inquired about it and foretold it, and now we have come along and found what they sought. Yet we have not received it either, and others will be born after us who will also find yet not receive, and they too will pass away, so that at the day's end we may all receive together, along with the patriarchs and prophets and apostles, . . . everlasting salvation.

Contemplating God's glory and seeing him face to face we shall be enabled to praise him forever, without wearying, without any of the pain of iniquity, without any of the perversion of sin. We shall praise God, no longer sighing for him but united with him for whom we have sighed even to the end, albeit joyful in our hope. For we shall be in that city where God is our good, God is our light, God is our bread, God is our life. Whatever is good for us, whatever we miss as we trudge along our pilgrim way, we shall find in him. EXPOSITIONS OF THE PSALMS 38.28.