

## 14. Psalms 37-40

### Reflecting on Psalm 37 in Jesus' Company



This is not a prayer. It is a manifesto on how to live in an unjust world. The psalmist calls on his age and experience (verses 25 and 35) to contrast two groups of people and God's judgment on their lives. Through greed, neglect, and historical events, the psalmist finds himself in a society in which some have grown rich at the expense of others. How are the dispossessed to act, and in what kind of project are those concerned for the dispossessed to be involved? Where is God in all this and how are people to do God's will? The psalm is a call not to lose heart when the irreligious seem to prosper, but to continue to trust in God and to wait upon God's grace. Justice will prevail. Not surprisingly, if we want to listen to Jesus, rather than the psalmist, we will need to make some adjustments to the text.

<sup>1</sup>Do not fret because people act badly;  
do not envy those who do wrong.

<sup>2</sup>They wither like grass, and fade like the green of the fields.

<sup>3</sup>Trust in GOD, and do good. Cultivate faithfulness.

<sup>4</sup>Let GOD be your delight,  
and you will be given what your heart is seeking.

<sup>5</sup>Commit your life to GOD. Trust God to act on your behalf.

<sup>6</sup>and your justice will shine forth like the dawn,  
your judgments like the sun at noon.

<sup>7</sup>Rest in GOD and wait patiently.  
Do not fret over those who prosper  
as they carry out their evil schemes.

<sup>8</sup>Restrain your anger. Control your rage.  
Fretting leads only to evil.

- <sup>11</sup>It is the meek who will inherit the land,  
and enjoy abundant prosperity.
- <sup>12</sup>The wicked plot against the just, and gnash their teeth.
- <sup>13</sup>Their end is near.
- <sup>14</sup>The wicked unsheathe the sword and draw the bow  
to bring down the poor and needy,  
to kill those who live upright lives.
- <sup>15</sup>Their sword will enter their own heart, their bow will be broken.
- <sup>16</sup>Better the few things owned by the just  
than to be wealthy and do evil.
- <sup>17</sup>The power of the wicked will be broken.  
GOD sustains the just.

<sup>18</sup>GOD watches over the lives of the blameless;  
their heritage will go on for ever.

<sup>19</sup>They are not put to shame in evil times,  
in the days of famine they have all they need.

<sup>20</sup>The wrongdoers will pass away like the flowers, vanish like smoke.

<sup>21</sup>The wicked borrow, and do not repay.  
The just are generous and keep giving.

<sup>22</sup>Those blessed by GOD will inherit the land.

<sup>23</sup>GOD makes our steps secure,  
holding us in love as we journey through life.

<sup>24</sup>We might stumble, but we will not fall,  
for GOD is holding us by the hand.

<sup>26</sup>The just are always giving liberally and lending,  
and their children will be blessed.

<sup>27</sup>Avoid evil, and do good, and you will always have a home.

<sup>28</sup>For GOD loves justice; and will not forsake the faithful.

The irreligious are altogether destroyed;  
the children of the wicked shall be cut off.

<sup>29</sup>The just will inherit the land, and live in it forever.

<sup>30</sup>The just utter wisdom,  
the judgments they pronounce are true.

<sup>31</sup>They carry the law of their God in their hearts.  
They do not falter.

32 The wicked watch for the just, seeking to kill them.

33 GOD will not abandon the just to their power,  
or let them be condemned when they are brought to trial.

34 Hope in GOD. Keep to the way of Love.

37 Observe the blameless, keep your eyes on the upright.  
Prosperity is for the peacemakers.

38 There is no future for those who cut themselves off from God.

39 The deliverance of the just comes from GOD,  
their refuge in time of trouble.

40 GOD rescues them from the wicked, and saves them.

## *Omitted*

*<sup>9</sup>For the wicked will be cut off.*

*<sup>10</sup>Wait but a moment: the irreligious are no more.*

*Search them out: they are not there.*

*<sup>25</sup>I have been young, and now am old,*

*and I have never seen the just forsaken or their children begging bread.*

*<sup>35</sup>I have seen the wicked puffed up with pride,*

*towering like a luxuriant cedar.*

*<sup>36</sup>I passed by again, and they were no more;*

*though I sought them, they could not be found.*



<sup>1</sup>Do not fret because people act badly;  
do not envy those who do wrong.

The psalmist builds up a picture of their lives and the evil for which they are responsible. They plan evil and carry it out (verses 7 and 12). They are 'irreligious', having no regard for God or God's will (verses 10, 28, 34 and 38). They are living in opulence (verses 7 and 16). They tower over others like a luxuriant cedar (verse 35).

He also describes what will happen to them. They will fade and wither (verses 2 and 10). Their day of retribution is coming (verse 13). Their sword will enter their own heart (verse 15). They will perish - vanish (verse 20). They will be cut off (verse 22). They will be no more (verse 36). They will be altogether destroyed (verse 38).

### 3 Trust in GOD, and do good

They cultivate faithfulness (verse 3). They commit their life's journey to God (verse 5). They rest in God (verse 7). They hope in God (verse 9). They are meek (verse 11). They are poor and needy, but live good lives (verse 14). They are generous and keep giving (verses 21 and 26). They are blessed by God (verse 22). They are just (verse 29). They keep to God's way (verse 34). They are people of peace (verse 37).

The psalmist speaks of the reward of the just. God will give them their heart's desire (verse 4). God will act on their behalf (verse 5). God upholds them (verse 17). Their heritage will last for ever (verse 18). They will have abundance (verse 19). They will not lack bread (verse 25). Their children will be for them a blessing (verse 26). They will always have a home (verse 27). They will experience salvation and liberation from God (verse 39).

The central refrain of the psalm is that they will inherit the land promised to them by God: **'The meek will inherit the land'** (verse 11. See also verses 3, 9, 18, 22, 27, 29).

Jesus quotes this verse in the beatitudes (Matthew 5:5).

<sup>28</sup>The irreligious are altogether destroyed;

the children of the wicked shall be cut off.

<sup>29</sup>The just will inherit the land, and live in it forever.

We recall Jesus' parable concerning God's ultimate judgment of what matters in life. There are those who give food to the hungry, and drink to the thirsty, who welcome strangers and clothe the naked, who care for the sick and visit those in prison (Matthew 25:35-36). They will inherit 'God's kingdom' (25:34), 'eternal life' (25:46).

And there are those who do not care for others in this way (Matthew 25:42-44). If they obstinately persist in their behaviour, the consequence for them will be separation from God (25:41 and 46).

The psalmist assures 'those who trust in GOD and do good' (verse 3): 'Your justice will shine forth like the dawn, and your judgments like the noonday sun' (verse 6). God will act in favour of the oppressed; and will vindicate those who commit themselves to God.

God is the one who liberated Israel from slavery in Egypt, led them through the desert and gave them the Promised Land. But there are some who, because of the injustice of the powerful, are not enjoying the land that is theirs. They are unjustly dispossessed. God will redeem them: 'GOD strengthens them and rescues them from the wicked, and saves them, because they take refuge in God' (verse 40). 'Their heritage will last forever' (verse 18). As we pray this psalm with Jesus we hear him say: 'Believe in me, and even though you die, you will live' (John 11:25).

God will lead us on our journey and sustain us  
(verse 17).

‘GOD makes our steps secure, holding us in love as  
we journey through life. We might stumble, but we  
will not fall, for GOD is holding us by the  
hand’ (verses 23-24).

‘They carry the law of God in their hearts. They  
do not falter’ (verse 31).

‘Hope in GOD. Keep to the way of Love’ (verse 34).

‘GOD will not forsake the faithful’ (verse 28).

Hear Jesus saying: 'Let GOD be your delight and you will be given what your heart is seeking' (verse 4).

'Commit your life to GOD' (verse 5).

'Rest in GOD and wait patiently' (verse 7).

'GOD makes our steps secure,  
holding us in love as we journey through life' (verse 23).

'God is holding us by the hand' (verse 24).

'You will always have a home' (verse 27).

'Hope in GOD. Keep to the way of Love' (verse 34).

There are a number of parallels between Psalm 37 and the Beatitudes.

‘Blessed and happy are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed and happy are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed and happy are the meek, for they will inherit the land.

Blessed and happy are those who hunger and thirst for justice,

for justice will prevail.

Blessed and happy are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Blessed and happy are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed and happy are the peacemakers, for they will be called

children of God.

Blessed and happy are those who are persecuted because they are just,

for theirs is the kingdom of heaven’ (Matthew 5:3-10).



## Psalm 38. Listening to Jesus



The psalm is composed as a prayer.

I have adapted it to have Jesus speaking to us as we listen.



<sup>1</sup>God is rebuking you, but not in anger;  
disciplining you, but not in wrath.

<sup>2</sup>The arrows of Love are striking you,  
the hand of Love lies heavy upon you.

<sup>3</sup>No part of your flesh is free from wounds  
because of your indignation.

There is no sound bone in your body  
because of your sin.

<sup>4</sup>Yes, your guilty deeds are overwhelming you  
their burden too heavy for you to bear.

<sup>5</sup>Your wounds grow foul and fester  
because of your folly.

<sup>6</sup>I know you are utterly bowed down and prostrate,  
mourning all day long.

<sup>7</sup>You are burning with fever.

No part of your body is free from pain.

<sup>8</sup>You are utterly spent and crushed.

You groan because of the anguish in your heart.

<sup>9</sup>God\* knows all your longing;

your sighing is not hidden from God.

<sup>10</sup>Your heart is pounding, your strength is spent;

the light of your eyes is gone.

<sup>11</sup>Friends and neighbours avoid you,

keeping their distance.

<sup>12</sup>Those who seek your life lay snares for you.

Those who seek to hurt you speak of ruin.

They think up treachery all the day long.

<sup>13</sup>Like the deaf who cannot hear, like the dumb unable to speak,

<sup>14</sup>you have no words for your defence.

<sup>15</sup>In GOD you can hope. God will answer you.

<sup>16</sup>They are gloating over you,

those who make fun of you when you stumble.

<sup>17</sup>On the point of collapsing, you have no relief from your pain.

<sup>18</sup>Confess your guilt. It is your sin that fills you with dismay.

<sup>19</sup>Your enemies are strong.

Many are those who hate you for no reason.

<sup>20</sup>They render you evil for good;

they attack you for seeking what is right.

<sup>21</sup>Your God will not forsake you. Your God is close.

<sup>22</sup>God\* is hastening to come to your aid.

The psalmist acknowledges his sin, but cries out to God not to leave him in such terrible physical and mental anguish. This psalm is unusual in the power of its description of suffering.

He assumes, according to the mentality of the time, that suffering is willed by God, and therefore must be a form of punishment for sin. He asks forgiveness.

As with Psalm 32, so here, this is not a prayer that the sinless Jesus could pray (On Jesus' sinlessness see the reflection on Psalm 6).

Instead of listening to the psalmist address God, we can listen to Jesus addressing us, knowing that he will hold us in love as we acknowledge our sinfulness and plead for God's compassion.

<sup>1</sup>God is rebuking you, but not in anger;  
disciplining you, but not in wrath.

<sup>2</sup>The arrows of Love are striking you,  
the hand of Love lies heavy upon you.

<sup>3</sup>No part of your flesh is free from wounds  
because of your indignation.

There is no sound bone in your body  
because of your sin.

<sup>4</sup>Yes, your guilty deeds are overwhelming you  
their burden too heavy for you to bear.

The psalmist is not objecting against being rebuked and disciplined, but against the extent of it, expressed here in terms of God's anger (verse 1; on God's 'anger' see the reflection on Psalm 2).

<sup>9</sup>God\* knows all your longing;  
your sighing is not hidden from God.

He is confident that in spite of his sin God knows that his deepest yearning is for communion with God (verse 9).

Having described his sufferings, he spends the rest of the psalm, beginning in verse 11, speaking of how other people are relating to him. They are afraid of the contagion that they would contract from contact with one with whom, in their eyes, God is obviously displeased. They take the occasion to threaten and defame him (verse 12).



## Praying Psalm 39 in Jesus' Company



<sup>1</sup>I said to myself: 'I will watch my behaviour  
lest I sin with my tongue.

I will control what I say  
when confronted by the wicked.'

<sup>2</sup>I was silent and held myself back, but to no avail.

The prosperity of the wicked stirred my grief,

<sup>3</sup>my heart was burning within me.

While I was attempting control, the fire inside me blazed.

I found myself unable to hold my tongue.

<sup>4</sup>'GOD, what will become of me? How fleeting is my life!

<sup>5</sup>A short span you have given me.

My days are as nothing in your sight.

*We human beings are no more than a breath.*

<sup>6</sup>We pass away like a shadow, our life passes by.

We amass possessions, not knowing who will enjoy them.

<sup>7</sup>So what am I waiting for? My God, my hope is in you.

<sup>8</sup>Free me from all my transgressions.

Do not make me the taunt of the fool.

<sup>9</sup>I am silent. I do not open my mouth,  
since this is all your doing.

<sup>10</sup>Stop tormenting me.

I am worn down by the blows of your hand.

<sup>11</sup>You chastise us in our guilt,

like a moth consuming what we treasure.

*We human beings are no more than a breath.*

<sup>12</sup>Hear my prayer, O GOD, attend to my cry.

Do not ignore my tears. For I am your guest,

a stranger passing by like all who have gone before me.

<sup>13</sup>Look away that I may breathe again,

before I depart and am no more.

*5&II We human beings* ('adam) *are no more than a breath* (hebel).

There is an allusion here to the story of Cain and Abel (Hebrew 'hebel'). Like Abel, we are here for a brief moment, and our life is over like a sigh, like a 'passing breath' that is here one moment and gone the next.

The psalmist is facing death. He tries to restrain himself but cannot, and bursts into a cry to God for respite. It is a tragic reflection on the human condition. The tension is not resolved and the reflection is indecisive.

The psalmist assumes that it is God who determines how long we live ('It is you who have done it' verse 9), so, since God is never unjust, his 'short span of life' (verse 5) must be punishment for his sins. The guilt of his transgressions lies heavily upon him (verses 8 and 11).

Tragically, his focus is on himself rather than on God, and so his hope is fragile. He wants God to turn his attention elsewhere and leave him living for a while yet (verse 13). He gives no indication of a belief in a life of communion with God beyond physical death.

Jesus' understanding of the way God relates to the human condition is very different from that of the psalmist. This, along with his sinlessness and his belief in God's gift of life after death, means that Psalm 39 is not a prayer that Jesus could make his own.

However, there are aspects of the psalmist's experience that Jesus shared. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews compares Jesus' shedding of blood to that of Abel (Hebrews 12:24). Like the psalmist Jesus pleaded with his Father to save him from death. In his struggle in Gethsemane was he pleading for more time to complete his mission? Like the psalmist (verse 7) Jesus placed his hope in God.

Unlike the psalmist, Jesus reached a place of peace and commitment to continue his mission of love, come what may, for he knew-in-faith that ultimately all that mattered was to do his Father's will ('Not my will but yours be done' Mark 14:36). Unlike the psalmist Jesus knew that physical death is not the end of life. He was passing from this world and going to the Father: 'I am coming to you' (John 17:13).

## We can hear Jesus praying

<sup>4</sup>'GOD, what will become of me? How fleeting is my life!

<sup>5</sup>A short span you have given me.

My days are as nothing in your sight.

*We human beings are no more than a breath.*

<sup>6</sup>We pass away like a shadow, our life passes by.

<sup>7</sup>'My God\*, my hope is in you'.

<sup>12</sup>'Hear my prayer, O GOD, attend to my cry'.

For the rest we can pray the psalm in Jesus' company, knowing that he understands our fears, as he reminds us of our Father's longing for us to 'live and live to the full' (John 10:10).



## Psalm 39

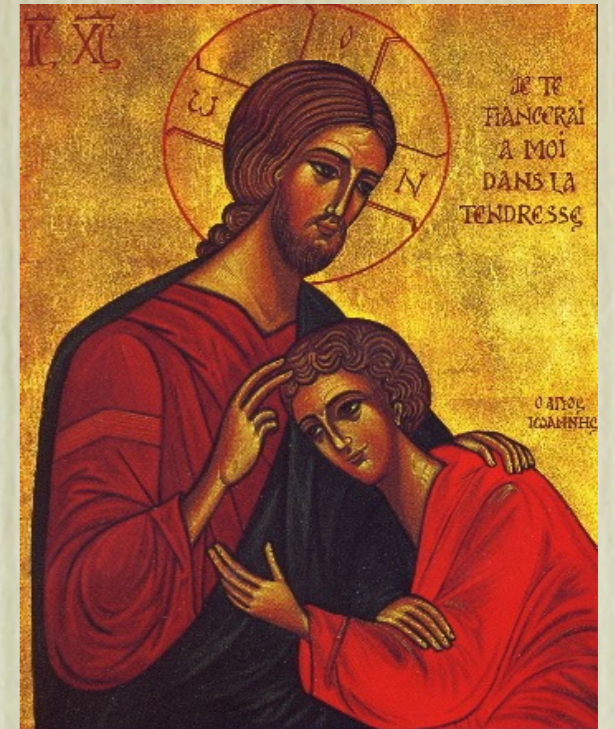
<sup>1</sup>I said to myself: 'I will watch my behaviour  
lest I sin with my tongue.  
I will control what I say  
when confronted by the wicked.'

<sup>2</sup>I was silent and held myself back, but to no avail.  
The prosperity of the wicked stirred my grief,  
<sup>3</sup>my heart was burning within me.

While I was attempting control, the fire inside me blazed.  
I found myself unable to hold my tongue.  
<sup>4</sup>'GOD, what will become of me? How fleeting is my life!  
<sup>5</sup>A short span you have given me.  
My days are as nothing in your sight.

*We human beings are no more than a breath.*

<sup>6</sup>We pass away like a shadow, our life passes by.  
We amass possessions, not knowing who will enjoy them.



<sup>7</sup>So what am I waiting for? My God, my hope is in you.

<sup>8</sup>Free me from all my transgressions.

Do not make me the taunt of the fool.

<sup>9</sup>I am silent. I do not open my mouth,  
since this is all your doing.

<sup>10</sup>Stop tormenting me.

I am worn down by the blows of your hand.

<sup>11</sup>You chastise us in our guilt,

like a moth consuming what we treasure.

*We human beings are no more than a breath.*

<sup>12</sup>Hear my prayer, O GOD, attend to my cry.

Do not ignore my tears. For I am your guest,

a stranger passing by like all who have gone before me.

<sup>13</sup>Look away that I may breathe again,

before I depart and am no more.

# Praying Psalm 40 with Jesus



<sup>1</sup>I anxiously awaited You, O GOD.

At long last you stooped down to me.

You heard my cry

<sup>2</sup>and drew me up from the desolate pit.

From the miry bog you set me on solid ground.

<sup>3</sup>You put in my mouth a new song, a song of praise.

Witnessing this, many will be moved

to put their trust in YOU.

<sup>4</sup>Blessed and happy are those who place their trust in GOD,

who are not seduced by idols, nor caught up in illusions.

<sup>5</sup>How many wonderful things you have done, O GOD.

How many graces you have thought up to favour us.

There is no one like you.

<sup>5</sup>I am tempted to recount them,  
but they surpass anything I could say.

<sup>6</sup>Sacrifice and offerings you do not desire.  
You want a listening ear.  
For burnt or sin offerings you have not asked.

<sup>7</sup>And so I say: 'Here I am.'  
In the scroll of the book it is written of me  
<sup>8</sup>that I am to carry out your will. O my God, I long to do it.  
Your law is etched in the depths of my heart.

<sup>9</sup>I proclaim the good news of your justice  
to the great congregation.  
See, I have not restrained my lips.  
You know this, O GOD.

<sup>10</sup>I have not kept your justice hidden within my heart.  
I have spoken of your faithfulness and your saving help.  
I have not concealed your covenant love and your faithfulness  
from the great congregation.

<sup>11</sup>O GOD, do not withhold from me  
your tender compassion.  
Let your covenant love and your faithfulness  
always keep me safe.

<sup>12</sup>I am beset with countless evils.  
[My guilty deeds have caught up with me, until I cannot see.  
They are more than the hairs of my head]  
and my heart sinks within me.

<sup>13</sup>Free me, O GOD. Hasten to help me.

*(Verses 14-15 are not in the Church's liturgy)*

*<sup>14</sup>Let all those who seek my life be put to shame and confusion.*

*Let those who desire to harm me be repulsed and dishonoured.*

*<sup>15</sup>Let those who say to me 'Aha! Aha!' remain aghast because of their shame.*

<sup>16</sup>May all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you.

May those who love your saving presence keep saying,

'Great is GOD!'

<sup>17</sup>As for me, I am poor and needy, but God\* think of me.

You are my helper, my deliverer. O my God, do not delay.

The psalmist sings in praise of GOD who has ‘**drawn me from the desolate pit**’ (verse 2). His need for help continues and he admits that it is his own sins that are largely responsible for his suffering: ‘**My guilty deeds have caught up with me**’ (verse 12). He has come to see that what God wants from him, more than anything else, is that he embrace God’s will in his heart:



<sup>7</sup>I say: 'Here I am.' In the scroll of the book it is written of me  
<sup>8</sup>that I am to carry out your will. O my God, I long to do it.  
Your law is etched in the depths of my heart (verses 7-8).

The psalmist declares his commitment to carry out God's call to witness to his personal experience of God's justice and uprightness, truth and saving action, covenant love and fidelity, and God's compassion (verses 6-10). God has dug through his blocked **ear** to open up a path for his word into the very centre of the psalmist's being.

'When Christ came into the world, he said, "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, 'See, God, I have come to do your will, O God' (in the scroll of the book it is written of me)' (Hebrews 10:5-7).

We join Jesus as he cries out to God in Gethsemane and from the cross.

<sup>1</sup>I anxiously waited for YOU, O GOD.

At long last you stooped down to me. You heard my cry  
<sup>2</sup>and drew me up from the desolate pit.

<sup>11</sup>O GOD, do not withhold from me  
your tender compassion.

Let your kindness and your faithfulness  
always keep me safe.

We share his pain as he continues to reach out to those who, in rejecting him, are rejecting his Father, closing their hearts to God's longing to free them from their 'idols' and 'illusions'.

<sup>4</sup>Blessed and happy are those who place their trust in YOU, O GOD,  
who are not seduced by idols, nor caught up in illusions.

5How many wonderful things you have done, O GOD.  
How many graces you have thought up to favour us.  
There is no one like you.

We join Jesus, too, as he rejoices when people, so often the simple people, open their hearts to welcome God whose heart longs to embrace them:

‘Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because ... you have revealed these things to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will” (Luke 10:21).

<sup>6</sup>Sacrifice and offerings you do not desire.

You want a listening ear.

For burnt or sin offerings you have not asked.

The psalmist knows that the cult is not enough for him. God is calling him to a special vocation.

In Matthew's Gospel Jesus twice quotes the following from Hosea: 'I desire steadfast love, not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings' (Hosea 6:6; quoted Matthew 9:13 and 12:5).

As we pray this psalm with Jesus, let us thank him for revealing to us a God of love. Let us pray to see whatever is blocking us from listening to God's Spirit in our hearts, revealing God's loving will to us. Let us renew our commitment to doing God's will.

## Psalm 40

<sup>1</sup>I anxiously awaited You, O GOD.

At long last you stooped down to me.

You heard my cry

<sup>2</sup>and drew me up from the desolate pit.

From the miry bog you set me on solid ground.

<sup>3</sup>You put in my mouth a new song, a song of praise.

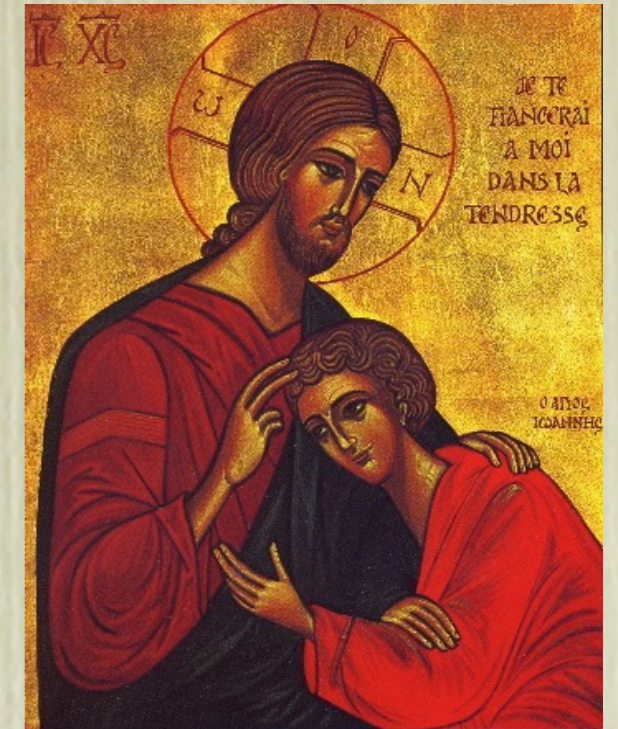
Witnessing this, many will be moved  
to put their trust in YOU.

<sup>4</sup>Blessed and happy are those who place their trust in GOD,  
who are not seduced by idols, nor caught up in illusions.

<sup>5</sup>How many wonderful things you have done, O GOD.

How many graces you have thought up to favour us.

There is no one like you.



<sup>5</sup>I am tempted to recount them,  
but they surpass anything I could say.

<sup>6</sup>Sacrifice and offerings you do not desire.  
You want a listening ear.  
For burnt or sin offerings you have not asked.

<sup>7</sup>And so I say: 'Here I am.'  
In the scroll of the book it is written of me  
<sup>8</sup>that I am to carry out your will. O my God, I long to do it.  
Your law is etched in the depths of my heart.

<sup>9</sup>I proclaim the good news of your justice  
to the great congregation.  
See, I have not restrained my lips.  
You know this, O GOD.

<sup>10</sup>I have not kept your justice hidden within my heart.  
I have spoken of your faithfulness and your saving help.  
I have not concealed your covenant love and your faithfulness  
from the great congregation.

<sup>11</sup>O GOD, do not withhold from me  
your tender compassion.  
Let your covenant love and your faithfulness  
always keep me safe.

<sup>12</sup>I am beset with countless evils.  
[My guilty deeds have caught up with me, until I cannot see.  
They are more than the hairs of my head]  
and my heart sinks within me.

<sup>13</sup>Free me, O GOD. Hasten to help me.

<sup>16</sup>May all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you.

May those who love your saving presence keep saying,  
'Great is GOD!'

<sup>17</sup>As for me, I am poor and needy, but God\* think of me.

You are my helper, my deliverer. O my God, do not delay.





Prayer of Abandonment