

CONTRITION

Psalm 38 • Isaiah 1:2–20 • Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article XII

PSALM	Psalm 38:3 “There is no health in my flesh because of your indignation; there is no soundness in my bones because of my sin.”
READING	Isaiah 1:18 “Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.”
BOOK OF CONCORD	Apology Article XII: Repentance

The Texts

Psalm 38 is the most anatomically detailed description of what sin does to the body and soul that the Psalter contains. There is no health in my flesh; there is no soundness in my bones; my wounds are foul and festering; I am utterly bowed down and prostrate; I groan by reason of the tumult in my heart. The Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article XII, quotes verses 4 and 8 of this psalm directly as the proof text for what true contrition actually is: the true terror of conscience which feels that God is angry with sin. Melancthon is not importing a theological concept into the psalm; he is reading the psalm as a document written by a man who has experienced that terror.

Isaiah 1’s opening chapters provide the same diagnosis from the prophet’s perspective on the nation. The whole head is sick; the whole heart is faint; from the sole of the foot to the head there is no soundness. The wounds and bruises and festering sores have not been pressed out, have not been bound up, have not been softened with oil. Jerusalem, once faithful, has become a harlot. This is the condition from which Isaiah 1:18 offers the only conceivable rescue: Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. The Apology calls this the new sentence that reverses the former sentence, and teaches that until the terrified conscience hears it, the diagnosis of Psalm 38 and Isaiah 1 produces only despair.

Discuss: *The Apology quotes Psalm 38:4 and 8 directly as the definition of what true contrition looks and feels like: the terror of a conscience that feels God’s anger at sin. Isaiah 1’s anatomical diagnosis covers the whole body from sole to head with no soundness in it. How does the Apology’s reading of these texts as descriptions of true contrition change the way a pastor uses them in preaching, compared to using them as general descriptions of human moral failure?*

Key Terms

Term	What It Means
True contrition	The Apology’s definition: the true terror of conscience which feels that God is angry with sin and which grieves that it has sinned. Not manufactured remorse or attrition born of fear of punishment, but the crushing reality Psalm 38 and Isaiah 1 describe.
Judas vs. Peter	The Apology’s contrast of two men who experienced equally crushing contrition. The contrition of Judas availed nothing; the contrition of Peter availed everything. The difference was not the depth of the sorrow but the presence or absence of faith apprehending the promise of Christ.
The new sentence	Melancthon’s image for faith in the Gospel: a judicial declaration that reverses the former sentence of the Law. The Law’s handwriting condemns; faith in the free promise of Isaiah 1:18 declares the scarlet sins white as snow. The verdict is overturned, not revised.
Voice from heaven	The Apology’s instruction for receiving absolution. The pastor’s word of forgiveness must be believed not otherwise than we would believe a voice from heaven, because it delivers what it announces: the quickening of the heart through the external Word of God.

Discuss: *The Apology’s distinction between Judas and Peter is that both experienced real, crushing contrition, but only Peter had faith apprehending the promise of Christ. Both men were horrified by what they had done. Only one survived the horror. What does a pastor do with the person in his congregation who knows he or she has sinned grievously and is sitting in the condition of Psalm 38 but cannot yet believe the new sentence of Isaiah 1:18?*

The Anatomy of True Contrition

The Apology opens Article XII by clearing away the accumulated rubble of medieval penitential theology. The Schoolmen had produced, Melancthon writes, idle and infinite discussions about whether a person was grieving from pure love of God or mere fear of punishment. The practical effect was a system that measured the quality of the sinner's emotional state rather than directing the sinner to Christ. The Apology refuses this measuring. True contrition is defined not by its origin in the sinner's psychology but by its object: it feels that God is angry with sin, and it grieves that it has sinned. Psalm 38's description of the crushing weight of iniquity going over the head, of the wounds festering, of the heart groaning, is not hyperbole. It is the phenomenology of what the Law does to a conscience it has actually reached.

Isaiah 1 provides the diagnostic language: from sole to head, no soundness. The Apology's description of the terrified conscience shattered by the Law echoes this precisely. In these terrors, the secure, fleshly heart is broken; it sees the true ugliness of sin and flees from the dreadful wrath of God, because human nature cannot endure it without the Word of God. This is the condition the Apology is protecting against two opposite errors: the shallow remorse of those who grieve only consequences, and the despair of those for whom the Law's terror is the last word. True contrition is neither of these. It is the diagnosis acknowledged in its full severity, held open for the Gospel to address.

Discuss: *The Apology says the true terror of conscience feels God's anger at sin, not merely human disappointment in oneself. Psalm 38's description of wounds festering and bones with no soundness is the diagnostic language for that terror. What is the practical difference between a person who is troubled by sin and a person in true contrition, and what does the difference require of the pastor who is trying to move the second person toward Isaiah 1:18's promise?*

The Danger of the Law Alone

The Apology's most pointed pastoral warning in Article XII is about what happens when the Law's crushing work is not followed by the Gospel. The Roman adversaries taught that men could merit grace through the terrors of contrition, provided they could summon up genuine love for God alongside the grief. Melancthon's response to this is a question: how will men love God in true terrors when they feel the terrible and inexpressible wrath of God? What else than despair do those teach who, in these terrors, display only the Law? The question is rhetorical, but its force is entirely pastoral. A person who has arrived at the condition Psalm 38 describes, bones with no soundness, wounds festering with no health in the flesh, cannot manufacture love. Demanding that she do so before receiving grace is cruelty dressed in theological language.

The contrast of Judas and Peter is the Apology's demonstration of this point in human experience. Both men betrayed Christ. Both experienced genuine, crushing remorse. Judas went out and hanged himself; Peter wept bitterly and was restored. The difference was not the quality of the sorrow. It was the presence or absence of faith in the promise of Christ. The contrition of Judas availed nothing because it had no faith to receive the promise. The contrition of Peter availed because faith apprehended what the risen Christ would confirm: feed my sheep, not because you deserve to, but because I have said so. The Law did its proper work in both men. Only one of them received the Gospel that was meant to follow it.

Discuss: *The Apology asks: when the conscience is in true terror, feeling the inexpressible wrath of God, what else do teachers display who show only the Law? Judas and Peter are the two answers to what happens when contrition meets or fails to meet the Gospel. How does the Apology's account of this danger change what a pastor preaches when he knows members of his congregation are sitting in the condition of Psalm 38, and what does it require to be said before the service ends?*

The New Sentence

Isaiah 1:18 arrives at the exact moment when the full weight of Isaiah 1:5–6 has been acknowledged: come now, let us reason together. The wounds and festering sores and the head sick and the heart faint are the premise; the snow-white scarlet is the conclusion. The Apology calls faith in this promise the new sentence, a judicial image that completes the forensic logic: the Law pronounced a sentence of condemnation over the guilty conscience; faith in the free promise pronounces a new sentence that reverses the former one and gives peace and life to the heart. This is not a revised verdict; it is an overturned one. The scarlet sins are not reduced to pink; they are declared white as snow.

The Apology insists that this new sentence is delivered through the external Word, specifically through absolution. The power of the keys administers the Gospel through the spoken word of forgiveness, which is the true voice of the Gospel. The pastor who speaks the absolution over a conscience in the condition of Psalm 38 is not performing a ritual; he is delivering the medicine Isaiah 1:18 promises. The Apology's instruction about how to receive this word is unambiguous: the voice of the one absolving must be believed not otherwise than we would believe a voice from heaven. The terrified conscience does not need to feel better before the word takes effect; it needs to hear the word spoken and receive it as the announcement it is.

Discuss: *The Apology calls faith the new sentence that reverses the former condemnation and gives peace to the heart, and says the absolution must be received as a voice from heaven. Isaiah 1:18's reversal of the diagnosis in Isaiah 1:5–6 is the scriptural form of that new sentence. What is preventing the members of your congregation from receiving the absolution with the weight the Apology assigns to it, and what would it take to recover that reception?*

The Payoff

Psalm 38's closing prayer is the testimony of a man who has survived the full weight of the diagnosis and found that the Lord has heard his groaning: *"For you, O Lord, do I wait; it is you, O Lord my God, who will answer."* Isaiah 1:18's snow-white promise was spoken by the God whose Son would eventually become the wound-bearer Himself, the One in whose body there was no soundness from sole to head on Good Friday, so that the scarlet sins of every Psalm 38 conscience could be declared white as snow by the new sentence He purchased at the cost of every drop of blood the wounds of His own body contained.