



Psalm 38 - A Penitent Sufferer's Plea for Healing

A Psalm of David, for the memorial offering.

Introduction

This is a lament that lays a person's troubles before God when that person realises that these troubles result from his own sin. The psalm describes anguish of body and mind, desertion by friends, and how the singer's folly has made him vulnerable to enemies ready to pounce.

Because the psalm acknowledges that the singer's sins lie behind these troubles, it is often called a 'penitential' psalm along with Psalms 6, 32, 51, 102, 130, and 143. Of course, not all troubles result from one's own sins; but this psalm is geared to those that do.

The title associates the psalm with the grain-offerings as described in Numbers 5:26, the portion of the grain offering that the priest burns on the altar; its purpose was probably to 'remind' God that the worshipper had consecrated these gifts of God's own abundant providence.

Psalm 38:1-8 - The Tumult of My Heart.

The singer describes the anguish of his body and mind, acknowledging that he deserves it because of his sin, and that these troubles come from God. The physical and emotional distress is complete.

- 1 O Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger,
or discipline me in your wrath.
- 2 For your arrows have sunk into me,
and your hand has come down on me.

Psalm 38:1-2

O Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger. Under a sense of God's deep displeasure, David cried out to God. He followed a wise path, drawing near to the Lord although he sensed both God's wrath and displeasure, as he had done on previous occasions, such as: <<*O Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger, or discipline me in your wrath*>> (Psalm 6:1).

For your arrows have sunk into me, and your hand has come down on me. David uses poetic pictures to describe how deeply he sensed the displeasure of God, as did Job: <<*For the arrows of the Almighty are in me; my spirit drinks their poison; the terrors of God are arrayed against me*>> (Job 6:4).

Your hand has come down on me. In this psalm, David describes the deep distress and agony he was feeling, and recognises that it was because of his own sin, as will be described. Today, it is understood that on the Cross Jesus was made the target of the same agony, but for the sins of all others and not for his own sin: <<*For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin*>> (Hebrews 4:15). This hand pressed down upon Jesus, and in a greater way than David ever knew. Understanding the agony helps Christians to understand something of the greatness of the love that sent him to the Cross, for them.

³ There is no soundness in my flesh
because of your indignation;
there is no health in my bones
because of my sin.

⁴ For my iniquities have gone over my head;
they weigh like a burden too heavy for me.

⁵ My wounds grow foul and fester
because of my foolishness;

Psalm 38:3-5

There is no soundness in my flesh because of your indignation. David not only sensed God's displeasure spiritually, but also physically: <<*They are also chastened with pain upon their beds, and with continual strife in their bones*>> (Job 33:19). This may have been because the chastening hand of God was evident in some kind of illness or injury, or it may have been because of the physical toll of stress in a season of deep spiritual depression.

There is no health in my bones because of my sin. David recognised the hand of God in his misery, but he did not think it was without cause. He knew that it was because of his sin, his iniquities, and his foolishness. David was miserable, but not a victim in the commonly understood sense, because his sins were the cause of the crisis.

They weigh like a burden too heavy for me. David felt oppressed under the weight of his sins. He hoped that an honest and heartfelt telling of his misery would move God's compassion to lift the weight of his guilt and shame. Jesus is the one who takes on the burden of sin: <<*Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light*>> (Matthew 11:29-30).

My wounds grow foul and fester. Sin is the wound of the soul, which must be washed with the tears of repentance, cleansed by the blood of Christ, and healed by the Holy Spirit.

Because of my foolishness. David makes no lame excuses nor does he try to blame others, but rightly takes responsibility for his actions and their consequences.

- ⁶ I am utterly bowed down and prostrate;
all day long I go around mourning.
- ⁷ For my loins are filled with burning,
and there is no soundness in my flesh.
- ⁸ I am utterly spent and crushed;
I groan because of the tumult of my heart.

Psalm 38:6-8

I am utterly bowed down and prostrate. The pain of David's sin affected him in almost every way. He described a severe depression and melancholy as well as specific bodily afflictions, i.e. my loins are filled with burning. He was utterly spent and crushed.

I groan because of the tumult of my heart. David was known as 'the sweet psalmist of Israel' (2 Samuel 23:1 NLT). Yet with great honesty, he could also groan before God and man, composing a sour psalm describing his misery in the strongest of terms.

Psalm 38:9-14 - I Am a Lonely Victim.

The description of anguish intensifies as the singer tells of his loneliness. He knows himself to be open to God's inspection (v.9), and yet his friends and companions stand aloof (v.11), thus compounding the helplessness with loneliness (vv.10-11).

Further, his own humbled condition, together with the aloofness of his friends, leaves him vulnerable to those who seek his life (vv.12-14).

The psalms frequently describe the faithful as being in danger from unscrupulous and unfaithful people, who will seize any opportunity to exploit or even destroy them, by legal accusations if possible, or by illegal means if necessary; the present weakness offers them just such an opportunity.

⁹ O Lord, all my longing is known to you;
my sighing is not hidden from you.

¹⁰ My heart throbs, my strength fails me;
as for the light of my eyes – it also has gone from me.

Psalm 38:9-10

O Lord, all my longing is known to you. Speaking to God as his master, i.e. Hebrew 'Adonai, David appealed to God with complete transparency. His misery was not hidden from God or from any who would hear this psalm. The Christian instinct is often to follow the pattern of Adam and Eve, and hide their sin and even to try to hide from God. David here is an example of the kind of unconcealed communication that is important for the one who truly desires God.

As for the light of my eyes – it also has gone from me. David felt so low that life and light itself was leaving him: <<*You have caused my companions to shun me; you have made me a thing of horror to them. I am shut in so that I cannot escape; my eye grows dim through sorrow. Every day I call on you, O Lord; I spread out my hands to you*>> (Psalm 88:8-9).

¹¹ My friends and companions stand aloof from my affliction,
and my neighbours stand far off.

¹² Those who seek my life lay their snares;
those who seek to hurt me speak of ruin,
and meditate treachery all day long.

¹³ But I am like the deaf, I do not hear;
like the mute, who cannot speak.

¹⁴ Truly, I am like one who does not hear,
and in whose mouth is no retort.

Psalm 38:11-14

My friends and companions stand aloof from my affliction. David's misery was unrelieved by either friends or relatives. His loved ones either did not care or could not help David.

Those who seek my life lay their snares. David endured worse than the lack of support from friends and relatives. He also faced determined enemies who constantly plotted his ruin or hope for his death: <<**My enemies wonder in malice when I will die, and my name perish**>> (Psalm 41:5).

But I am like the deaf, I do not hear. David was so depressed and afflicted that he felt powerless to respond to these attacks. His inability to defend himself meant that he needed God more than ever: <<**They were astounded beyond measure, saying, 'He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak'**>> (Mark 7:37).

Psalm 38:15-22 - You Alone Are My Hope.

In such a hopeless situation, the faithful must look to God alone, and here David implores God to come to his aid. He shows true faith in confessing the iniquity for which he is being disciplined (v.18), and in calling the Lord his salvation (v.22).

- ¹⁵ But it is for you, O Lord, that I wait;
it is you, O Lord my God, who will answer.
- ¹⁶ For I pray, 'Only do not let them rejoice over me,
those who boast against me when my foot slips.'

Psalm 38:15-16

But it is for you, O LORD, that I wait. Despite his spiritual depression, David clung to hope in the Lord. Although he did not feel it, in faith he said it is you, O Lord my God, who will answer: <<**I call upon you, for you will answer me, O God; incline your ear to me, hear my words**>> (Psalm 17:6). David chose to allow his affliction to press him towards God instead of away from the God who was his only hope.

Once again v.15 provides an example of the use of the three Hebrew words most commonly used to refer to God in one verse:

- LORD, translating *Yahweh*, referring to the covenant God of Israel.
- Lord, translating '*Adonai*', referring to God as Master or person of respect
- God, translating *Elohim*, the plural of the word for God in the generic sense of the Godhead.

Only do not let them rejoice over me. David appealed to God not only because he was miserable, but also because he did not want his adversaries to rejoice over him: <<*I can count all my bones. They stare and gloat over me*>> (Psalm 22:17).

Those who boast against me when my foot slips. David's opponents were always looking for opportunities to bring him down or weaken his authority. Many in the church today find that the world is watching them and waiting for them to do something that is perceived to be against what they believe in. This allows those that oppose the church to be critical and to call any weakness hypocrisy. However, it is God who is the only true judge: <<*Vengeance is mine, and recompense, for the time when their foot shall slip; because the day of their calamity is at hand, their doom comes swiftly*>> (Deuteronomy 32:35), and: <<*I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me*>> (1 Corinthians 4:4).

- 17 For I am ready to fall,
and my pain is ever with me.
- 18 I confess my iniquity;
I am sorry for my sin.
- 19 Those who are my foes without cause are mighty,
and many are those who hate me wrongfully.
- 20 Those who render me evil for good
are my adversaries because I follow after good.

Psalm 38:17-20

I confess my iniquity. David again thought about his own sin that was the cause of his misery. In many other psalms David declared his innocence, especially in comparison to his enemies, but not in this psalm. This psalm came out of David's anguish over his sin.

Christians are not required to beat themselves up over their moral failings or their transgressions but they are required to come before the Lord, confess their sins openly and honestly, and then be secure in the knowledge that they are forgiven because of the grace and mercy of God through Christ. This was also true of God's people before Christ came: <<*But if they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their ancestors, in that they committed treachery against me and, moreover, that they continued hostile to me – so that I, in turn, continued hostile to them and brought them into the land of their enemies; if then their uncircumcised heart is humbled and they make amends for their iniquity, then will I remember my covenant with Jacob; I will*

remember also my covenant with Isaac and also my covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land>> (Leviticus 26:40-42).

Those who render me evil for good. From the very beginning there have been such people who oppose God and those who wish to be faithful to him: <<*We must not be like Cain who was from the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous*>> (1 John 3:12).

Those who are my foes without cause are mighty. David appealed to God for help in light of the energy and strength of his enemies, and because they were against him for no good reason, i.e. I follow after good.

²¹ Do not forsake me, O Lord;
O my God, do not be far from me;
²² make haste to help me,
O Lord, my salvation.

Psalm 38:21-22

Do not forsake me, O Lord. The psalm closes without eloquence, only with a heartfelt cry. More than anything David wanted the sense of God's presence, i.e. do not be far from me: <<*Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help*>> (Psalm 22:11). It is likely that the absence of that sense was David's greatest trial in this dark season.

Make haste to help me, O Lord, my salvation. David pressed his need before God with urgency and looked to the Lord as his only salvation: <<*But you, O Lord, do not be far away! O my help, come quickly to my aid!*>> (Psalm 22:19). The psalm ends without a change in circumstances but with continued faith in God: <<*Say also: 'Save us, O God of our salvation, and gather and rescue us from among the nations, that we may give thanks to your holy name, and glory in your praise*>> (1 Chronicles 16:35).