

Psalm 38

A Psalm of David, to bring to remembrance.

Psalm 38: Some debate as to whether the details (of verse 1-8), should be taken literally, and thus as a reference to a physical illness, or figuratively, making them a vivid picture of psychological and moral distress.

The detail and length of the description, as well as its personal nature seem to point to some serious disease from which David is suffering as he writes.

In addition to the physical malady, David has been deserted by his friends and threatened by his foes (verses 12-13).

His only hope is to trust in the LORD (verses 14-16), to whom he presents his lament (verses 17-20), and his petition (verses 21-22).

Verses 1-22:

Prayers surround a core of intense lament (verses 2-20).

In many ways David's laments parallel those of Job.

David's perspective is that his painful plight is due, at least in part, to his personal sin.

David's opening and closing prayers (in Psalm 38), relate to two onslaughts by enemies.

- (I) Introductory Prayer (38:1-2).
- (II) First Onslaught: The Enemy Within (38:3-10).
- (III) Second Onslaught: Enemies Without (38:11-20).
- (IV) Concluding Prayers (38:21-22).

Title:

"To bring to remembrance":

Literally "To cause to remember" (compare the title to Psalm 70).

The psalmist either

- (1) Reminds God of his plight so that He might act; or
- (2) Reminds himself and the community of his historic predicament so that both he and they would fervently pray in similar contexts of acute suffering.

Psalm 38:1 "O LORD, rebuke me not in thy wrath: neither chasten me in thy hot displeasure."

(See the notes at Psalm 6:1), where the same language occurs, except in the change of a single Hebrew "word," that is, "wrath," though expressing the same idea.

"Neither chasten me in thy hot displeasure":

The Hebrew in both is the same, except that in this place the negative particle is omitted, but without affecting the sense.

It is not improbable that the one was copied from the other, or that this was composed with the language of the former in the memory.

Thus, we often use language with which we are familiar, as being well adapted to express our ideas (compare Psalms 6:1; 39:11; Jer. 31:18).

David is like so many of us.

David sinned and then felt guilty about that sin.

He knew he deserved to be punished of the Father.

He is asking the Father in this to forgive him, and if He punishes him, that it not be so severe.

David knows God loves him and the punishment will not be to the death.

He also knows that God is merciful and longsuffering.

None of us want to be punished for the sins we have done.

We all cry for mercy.

Psalm 38:2 "For thine arrows stick fast in me, and thy hand presseth me sore."

"Thine arrows":

The language relates to the Divine Warrior motif; on God as Archer (compare Deut. 32:23; Job 6:4; 16:13; Psalm 7:12; Lam. 3:12-13).

The arrow that is bothering David is the one sticking in his heart.

Of course, it is not a literal arrow, it is his conscience.

When the hand of God is on you, there is no greater anguish.

Everyone who ever committed a sin and was sorry for that sin has felt these same things.

Verses 3-8:

While the psalmist laments over his sufferings, he acknowledges that he suffers because of his own “sin” and “foolishness”, not because of circumstances beyond his control.

Psalm 38:3 "[There is] no soundness in my flesh because of thine anger; neither [is there any] rest in my bones because of my sin."

“There is no soundness in my flesh because of thine anger”:

The psalmist begins with a description of his bodily troubles; and, first of all, declares that there is "no soundness in his flesh."

I.e. no healthiness, no feeling of vigor and no vital strength.

"Neither is there any rest in my bones because of my sin":

Or "peace".

There; sin breaks the believer's rest, and disturbs his peace.

Nor can he, in a view of it, find any rest in himself, nor in any creature, nor in any other service or duty.

Only in Jesus Christ, his blood, righteousness, and sacrifice.

This is not a physical illness, but is a sickness of his spirit that makes him hurt all over.

Until he gets his conscience cleared with God, there will be no rest for him at all.

He will roll and tumble in bed, and get up feeling as if he had been beaten with a board during the night.

There will be no peace for him, or us, until the sin is confessed and forgiveness is accepted.

Psalm 38:4 "For mine iniquities are gone over mine head: as a heavy burden they are too heavy for me."

Like an inundation of waters, as the waves and billows of the sea.

For the waters to come up to the neck or chin shows great danger.

But when they go over the head, the case is desperate, and a person is sinking and drowning.

Compare with this (Psalm 69:1).

The simile may denote both the number and weight of sins.

And also signifies the overwhelming distress the psalmist was in, when viewing them.

"As a heavy burden they are too heavy for me":

They press me down, crush me to the earth, are more than I can bear.

There is no heavier load to carry than the burden of sin.

His mind is stayed constantly on his sin.

Psalm 38:5 "My wounds stink [and] are corrupt because of my foolishness."

"My foolishness":

On culpable ethical folly, compare Psalm 69:5.

David views this as the reason for the divine chastisements (of verse 3).

The more he thinks about the sin, the worse it seems.

He finally is so eaten up by the sin that it seems to even have a bad odor.

Psalm 38:6 "I am troubled; I am bowed down greatly; I go mourning all the day long."

Discomposed and perplexed in mind; his thoughts were disturbed and irregular, and in the utmost confusion and distress.

This trouble was not only on account of the affliction that was upon him, but chiefly because of his sin.

And which was increased by the view he had of the displeasure of God, concluding he was come forth against him in wrath and fury.

"I am bowed down greatly":

Not in his body, at least not in that only, as if he was bowed together by his disorder, that he could not lift himself up.

For he is said to walk in the next clause.

Rather he bowed down his head as a bulrush voluntarily, and through sorrow and shame could not lift it up before the LORD.

Though it may chiefly design the pressure of his mind, that his soul was cast down within him, and with all his spiritual reasoning he could not erect himself.

It is the LORD that raises up those that are bowed down in this sense (see Psalm 42:5).

"I go mourning all the day long":

Constantly; without any intermission.

On the word rendered "go mourning" (see notes at Psalm 35:14).

The idea here is, that, on account of sin, he was crushed and bowed down as a mourner is with his sorrows, and that he appeared constantly as he walked about with these badges of grief and heavy sorrow.

The disease which he had, and which was so offensive to himself (Psalm 38:5), and to others (Psalm 38:11), was like the filthy and foul garments which mourners put on as expressive of their sorrow (see notes on Job 1:20 and Job 2:8).

When a person is so eaten up by sin, it does no good to go to work.

You could not get your mind off the sin long enough to think straight enough to get any of the work done.

Doctors of Psychiatry say that a person who is filled with guilt many times will look constantly at the ground.

They will not be able to hold their head up and look you squarely in the eye.

This is what this verse above is saying.

He is bowed down with mourning for his sin.

Psalm 38:7 "For my loins are filled with a loathsome [disease]: and [there is] no soundness in my flesh."

This would seem to indicate the seat of the disease, though not its nature.

The word used here, according to Gesenius (Lexicon), properly denotes the internal muscles of the loins near the kidneys, to which the fat adheres.

The word rendered "loathsome" is derived from qâlâh, a word which means to roast, or to parch, as fruit, grain, etc.

And then, in the form used here, it means scorched, burned; hence, a burning or inflammation.

And the whole phrase would be synonymous with "an inflammation of the kidneys."

The word used here does not imply that there was any eruption, or ulcer, though it would seem from (Psalm 38:5), that this was the fact, and that the inflammation had produced this effect.

"And there is no soundness in my flesh":

Which is repeated (see Psalm 38:3); partly for confirmation's sake, and partly to show the continued sense of it.

As persons under a disorder are continually making mention of it.

David is speaking of deep worry which could even cause an ulcer, if the worry is not stopped.

Many physical diseases are started by depression.

Psalm 38:8 "I am feeble and sore broken: I have roared by reason of the disquietness of my heart."

Both in body, natural strength being weakened by the affliction, and dried up like a potsherd by the heat of the distemper.

And in soul, being weak in the exercise of faith and other graces.

The word is used of Jacob, fainting at and disbelieving the news of his son Joseph being alive (Gen. 45:26).

"And sore broken":

In his constitution with the disease, and in his mind with trouble.

Especially for his sin, and under a sense of the divine displeasure.

His bones were broken by his fall, and his heart broken with a sense of sin (Psalm 51:8).

"I have roared by reason of the disquietness of my heart":

Which was like the raging of the sea, as the word rendered disquietness here signifies.

And to which the uneasiness and restlessness of wicked men is sometimes compared (Isa. 5:30).

And so great was the disquietude of this good man under affliction, and sense of sin and wrath, that he had no rest night nor day.

And could not forbear crying out, in a very hideous manner, like the roaring of a lion.

Those who are depressed feel much older than they really are.

This roaring just means a lack of peace.

When your heart is disturbed you are sick all over.

Psalm 38:9 "Lord, all my desire [is] before thee; and my groaning is not hid from thee."

"Lord, all my desire is before thee".

That is, Thou knowest all that I would ask or that I need.

This is the expression of one who felt that his only hope was in God.

And that He fully understood the case.

There was no need of repeating the request.

He was willing to leave the whole case with God.

"And my groaning is not hid from thee".

My sighing; the expression of my sorrow and anguish.

As God certainly heard these sighs.

And as He wholly understood the case, David hoped that He would mercifully interpose on his behalf.

We all feel sometimes that God does not know of our trouble, but He knows even every thought that we have.

David is saying here, that he has placed all of his problems on the LORD.

He also, knows that God has heard him.

Psalm 38:10 "My heart panteth, my strength faileth me: as for the light of mine eyes, it also is gone from me."

"My heart panteth":

Or "goes about"; runs here and there, and finds no rest.

As Aben Ezra interprets the word from the Targum he cites; through the Targum we have rendered it, "my heart shakes with fear", or dread, as persons in a fever.

Jarchi interprets the word, surrounded with grief; it denotes the panting or palpitation of the heart, through sorrow and dread, and the failing of it, even as at death.

"My strength faileth me":

Or "forsakes me".

Bodily strength and spiritual strength; the strength of faith, hope, and confidence.

"As for the light of mine eyes, it also is gone from me":

Which is often the case of persons under bodily disorders.

Their eyes grow dim, and sight fails them.

And this might be true in a spiritual sense of the psalmist, who had lost sight of God as his covenant God.

Of his interest in his love, in the blessings of his grace, and in eternal salvation, and was walking in darkness, and saw no light.

You can see in this statement of David, the feelings of those who feel that God has not yet forgiven them.

The person would feel that their heart was about to fail them.

The sparkle has gone from their eye.

Psalm 38:11 "My lovers and my friends stand aloof from my sore; and my kinsmen stand afar off."

"Lovers ... friends ... kinsmen":

Those near and dear to him had abandoned him to his adversity, adding insult to injury.

Guilt from sin is a personal thing.

Those around you seldom realize the devastating feelings that have come with the guilt.

Psalm 38:12 "They also that seek after my life lay snares [for me]: and they that seek my hurt speak mischievous things, and imagine deceits all the day long."

This was a new aggravation of his affliction.

That those who were his enemies now sought to accomplish their purposes against him with better hopes of success, by taking advantage of his sickness.

"Lay snares for me":

To the desertion of friends is added the persecution of enemies, who take advantage of the debility and prostration caused by sickness to plot against the writer's life.

To "lay snares for him," and devise evil against him.

Those who assign the psalm to David suppose the devices described in (2 Sam. 15:1-6), he referred to.

"And they that seek my hurt":

Speak mischievous things; to the injury both of his character and reputation.

"Speak mischievous things":

Slandorous words.

They charge me with things that are false, and that tend to injure me.

Using the very fact that he was thusly afflicted, they might, in accordance with prevailing belief, and with the conviction of the psalmist also (Psalm 38:3-5), have some people conclude that he was guilty.

This was done by the three friends of Job.

And the enemies of the psalmist may thus have taken advantage of his sickness to circulate false reports about him which he could not then well meet.

"And imagine deceits all the day long":

Contrive artful schemes to deceive (see Psalm 35:20).

Literally, speak maliciously; i.e. defamatory statements about me, bring false accusations against me (compare 2 Sam. 16:7-8).

Not only is David guilt ridden, but he feels that God will not intervene in his behalf with any of his enemies.

David is saying here, that the sins that he did commit are not as bad as the ones he is being accused of.

Verses 13-17: The psalmist depicts himself as one who has no way to help himself, he is like a man who is both “deaf” and “dumb”.

This dire situation, resulting from his own sin, led him to find hope now only in the LORD (39:7; and 51:3).

The spiritually dead cannot save themselves, but God has acted to save them (Eph. 2:1-5).

The ultimate example of non-response to tauntings and torturings may be seen in the Suffering Servant of (Isa. 53:7; compare 1 Peter 2:23).

Psalm 38:13 "But I, as a deaf [man], heard not; and [I was] as a dumb man [that] openeth not his mouth."

“But I, as a deaf man, heard not”.

I was as if I had been deaf, and did not hear them or know what they were about.

I took no notice of what they did any more than if I had not heard them.

That is, he did not reply to them.

And he did not become angry; he was as calm and patient as if they had said nothing.

"And I was as a dumb man that openeth not his mouth":

As if I were a man that could not speak.

I was perfectly silent under all this persecution (compare 2 Sam. 16:10).

How eminently true was this of the Savior? (Isa. 53:7; 1 Peter 2:23; Matthew 26:63; 27:12; Matthew 27:14).

David's grief over what he has done wrong, has left him feeling as if he deserves all that is being said about him, even though much of it is not true.

He does not speak out and say it is not true, because he feels as if he deserves to be punished.

If God won't punish him, then these enemies will punish him for God.

He is willing to endure any punishment to get rid of this guilt.

Psalm 38:14 "Thus I was as a man that heareth not, and in whose mouth [are] no reproofs."

“Thus I was as a man that heareth not”:

Anything that is said unto him; he took no more notice of it than if he had never heard it.

But he bore all the reproachful language and defamatory statements of men with much calmness and patience.

"And in whose mouth are no reproofs":

As if he had nothing to say for himself, in vindication of both to his character, and to the refutation of his enemies.

As if he had no arguments to make use of, for the conviction and reproof of his adversaries.

David admits this is the reason why he did not speak out here.

Psalm 38:15 "For in thee, O LORD, do I hope: thou wilt hear, O Lord my God."

Thus I acted, because my hope was in thee.

I looked for thy interposition.

I knew that thou wouldst "maintain my right, and my cause" (Psalm 9:4).

In thine own good time and in thine own good way.

I said to myself in my heart.

"Thou wilt hear O Lord my God":

Margin, as in Hebrew: "answer."

The idea is, that God would answer his prayers, and that his character would, in answer to those prayers, be set right before the world.

Now, we see the first glimmer of faith in the LORD.

Notice that David calls Him (my God).

Psalm 38:16 "For I said, [Hear me], lest [otherwise] they should rejoice over me: when my foot slippeth, they magnify [themselves] against me."

This he had expressed in prayer to God.

He had committed his cause to him, and entreated him that he would hear and answer him; giving this as a reason.

"Lest otherwise they should rejoice over me":

At his misfortunes and calamities, at the continuance of his trouble and distress, both of his body and mind.

"When my foot slippeth":

As it sometimes did through the corruptions of nature, the temptations of Satan, and the snares of the world.

Which is more or less the case of all the people of God.

Who are all subject to slips and falls, though they shall not finally and totally fall away.

"They magnify themselves against me":

That is, his enemies exulted and triumphed over him: this was what he found by experience.

And therefore, makes use of it as an argument with God, that he would hear and answer and deliver him out of his trouble, and preserve him from falling.

David is saying:

As bad as I am LORD, I am yours and your enemies and mine will laugh at me, if you do not answer me.

They will be thrilled that I have fallen out of your grace.

Psalm 38:17 "For I [am] ready to halt, and my sorrow [is] continually before me."

Just falling into utter destruction (see Jer. 20:10).

And therefore, if thou dost not help me speedily, it will be too late.

"And my sorrow is continually before me":

I am deeply and constantly sensible of thy just hand, and of my sins.

The cause of it; wherewith I shall be overwhelmed, if thou dost not prevent it.

David is saying in this: If you don't help me, I will die from the sorrow I am feeling for the sin I have committed.

Psalm 38:18 "For I will declare mine iniquity; I will be sorry for my sin."

Either to men, to ease his mind, or to justify God in his proceedings with him, and for their caution and admonition.

Or rather to God, against whom he had sinned, and who only could pardon him.

With a view to which he was determined to make a free and open confession of it before him.

"I will be sorry for my sin":

Or "careful" about it.

That is, how he committed it for the future.

True repentance for sin produces a carefulness to abstain from all the appearance of it (see 2 Corinthians 7:10).

David is admitting guilt and is even ready to admit it to whomever the LORD would have him admit it.

David says, I am sorry now for my sin, and I will be sorry in the future of this sin as well.

Verses 19-20:

Although he had confessed personal sins, he remained legally innocent in comparison with his persecutors.

Psalm 38:19 "But mine enemies [are] lively, [and] they are strong: and they that hate me wrongfully are multiplied."

The psalmist goes back to the thought of his enemies, to whom he has made no answer, and whom he has not ventured to rebuke (verses 13-14).

He remembers that they are full of life and strength and he calls to mind the fact that they are many in number.

He puts on record the cause of their enmity, which is not his sin, but his earnest endeavor to forsake his sin and follow after righteousness (verse 20).

And then, in conclusion, he makes a direct appeal to God for aid against them.

First negatively (verse 21), and then positively in the final outburst, "Make haste to help me, O Lord my Salvation" (verse 22).

"And they are strong":

Not only hale and robust in body, but abounding in riches and wealth, which are the strength of wicked men.

"And they that hate me wrongfully are multiplied":

That is, such as hated him without a cause, and made lies and falsehoods the reasons of it.

These increased in numbers, or in their outward state and circumstances (see Psalm 73:4).

Now David is telling the LORD that even though he did wrong to the LORD, he did not do the wrongs to these evil ones that are hating him.

David realizes that his enemies are too many for him and too strong.

If God does not help him, he is in terrible trouble.

Psalm 38:20 "They also that render evil for good are mine adversaries; because I follow [the thing that] good [is]."

They hate and persecute me, not only without any injury or provocation on my part, but as it were in requital of the good which I have done to them.

"Because I follow the thing that good is": Or "follow good".

A good God, whom his soul followed hard after (Psalm 63:8).

The good Shepherd of the sheep, who led him into green pastures, wherever he followed him (Psalm 23:1).

The good Spirit of God his guide, whom he walked after (Rom. 8:1).

Good and holy men of God, whom he took for examples and copied after.

And every good work, which he pursued with eagerness and pleasure. And all this drew upon him the hatred of his adversaries.

David reminds God that these adversaries (enemies), are evil men who hate God.

David puts in one last plea, that he loves God and the desire of his heart is to follow God.

David may not always do the right thing, but he wants in his heart to do right.

Psalm 38:21 " Forsake me not, O LORD: O my God, be not far from me."

Or continue not to forsake.

For he seems to have been under divine desertion, and might be under apprehensions that God had utterly forsaken him.

Which he entreats he would not, though his friends had forsaken him, and his own strength had failed and left him (Psalm 38:10).

"O my God, be not far from me":

As to his gracious presence, and with respect to help and deliverance.

Otherwise God is not far from any of his creatures, being omnipresent.

We see a desperate plea from David for the LORD to be with him and help him against their mutual enemy.

I believe the worst thing about not making it to heaven would be the loneliness of not being with Jesus Christ.

That is what David is saying here, that he could not stand.

Psalm 38:22 "Make haste to help me, O Lord my salvation."

Or, "for my help".

His case required haste, and God does help his people when none else can, and that right early.

"O Lord, my salvation":

By which it appears that his prayer was a prayer of faith.

He saw that his salvation was in the Lord, and in no other.

And though he had been and was in such a low condition, both in soul and body, yet his faith was not lost.

That is an abiding grace, and will continue under the influence of the author and finisher of it, until the end of it is received.

The salvation of the soul.

R. Moses thinks the phrase "make haste" is to be repeated here, and read thus, "make haste, O Lord, to my salvation".

The cry of every believer in Christ today should be, "Come quickly Lord Jesus". That is the cry of David here.

Psalm 38 Questions

1. David asks the LORD to rebuke him not in His _____.
2. What was David feeling after he sinned?
3. What does the statement (thine arrows stick fast) mean?
4. What is the arrow?
5. What is David saying about no rest in his bones?
6. When will peace come to David?
7. What is the heaviest load a person can experience?
8. Why can't many people look you squarely in the eye?
9. Deep worry can cause what kind of physical illness?
10. Who feels much older than they really are?
11. What took the sparkle from David's eye?
12. Guilt from sin is a _____ thing.
13. In verse 11, who stand aloof from David?
14. What 2 impairments did David say he was like in verse 13?
15. Why does David not speak out against those who are telling lies about him?
16. Who is David's hope?
17. What is David saying in verse 17?
18. How does David describe his enemies in verse 19?
19. What does adversaries mean?
20. David says, he does not always do the right thing, but what is in his favor?
21. What does the author think would be the worst thing about not making it to heaven?
22. Who does David call the Lord in verse 22?