

Psalm 38

Introduction – Psalm 38, one of the penitential Psalms, is one of the rougher parts of the Psalter; sin and suffering are both present and ongoing repentance towards God is a major theme. The title says, "*To bring to remembrance*" and this instructs us that we are to see the Christian life as a life of ongoing repentance. But we also learn that this is a different kind of repentance than what many Christians call repentance and what it means to be a forgiven sinner.

The Prayers – The psalm is all prayer, but the Psalm-singer addresses Yahweh in four specific instances (v1, 9, 15, 21-22) which are interspersed between three complaints. In v1, the cry is for God not to chasten him in wrath or displeasure; the difference is between raw justice vs loving discipline (Psalm 6:1-2) and so he is asking for mercy, something we never deserve. In the second (v9), the Psalm-singer makes clear that the suffering brought on by the Lord has worked: it has his full attention, God has his full attention, and he knows that his only deliverance is from God. In the third (v15), he states that he waits on the Lord and that he knows his only hope is in God; his only hope from God's discipline is to run to God and wait on Him knowing He will answer. Finally, the psalm ends (vv21-22) with a prayer that God not forsake nor be far from the Psalm-singer, and that "*my God*" quickly come to his aid.

Chastisement for Sin (vv2-8) – The first prayer asked the Lord not to discipline Him in "*wrath*" and "*hot displeasure*" because that is exactly what it feels like to the Psalm-singer. The arrows go deep; God's hand is heavy (v2), down to his bones (v3). His burden is like a millstone hung around his neck while cast into the deep (v4, cf. Luke 17:2). He knows this affliction (afflictions – physical, mental, spiritual) are "*because of my sin*" (v3) and "*foolishness*" (v4). God is working him over (vv5-7) and this causes him to groan (lit. "roar") because "*of the turmoil of my heart*." By this we learn that conviction of sin is a piercing and pressing thing, it is sharp and sore, smarting and crushing (Spurgeon).

Oftentimes suffering is not due to particular sins we have committed (consider Job or the man born blind in John 9). But that is not the case always. Here, the Psalm-singer knows what he has done and knows that God has brought this upon him to bring him to repentance. Many times affliction and pain have the ability to clear the head and focus your attention properly. Where is your attention focused?

All Alone (vv10-14) – The Psalm-singer admits he feels awful and looks awful (v10). On top of this, his friends have backed away and he has no support (v11) which has opened up an opportunity for his enemies to attack (v12). Either because he cannot or would not, the Psalm-singer refuses to listen to them (vv13-14).

People do not like to be around those who are suffering, disabled, or disfigured. Friends may distance themselves because of our sin (it may have been towards them) or because of the consequences of our sin (and they may not want to be associated with us now). At other times, it doesn't matter how close they think they are coming, it feels like no one can possibly understand or empathize with your situation. This was the situation of our Savior as He hung on the cross (Isaiah 53:3-4), abandoned by most of His followers and friends. And the distinguishing mark of the sheep and the goats in Matt 25 is that the sheep reach out to those who are suffering to help them, serve them, and comfort them.

Arguing for the Suffering to Cease (vv16-20) – The complaints have gone from his wretched condition to the abandonment by his friends to the unjust treatment of his enemies. Five arguments are given as to why God should cease His chastisement. First, his enemies must not be given an opportunity to gloat any longer (v16). Second, he has already slipped and is about to fall (v17). Third, he has confessed and is confessing his sin (v18). Fourth, he is drastically outnumbered by his enemies; neither the world, the flesh, nor the devil, are ever tired of their unremitting energy to overthrow him (v19). Fifth, his repentance and his doing good are only inflaming his enemies (v20). We are encouraged to make similar arguments honestly and pointedly to our God.

A Forgiven Sinner with a Backbone – The Psalm-singer is not one who never admits he is wrong. He acknowledges his sin and folly. At the same time, he also knows that his adversaries are coming against him, not because of his wrongdoing, but because he has stood or is standing now for what is right even if it includes confessing his own fallen state. This is the kind of person who is charged for hypocrisy for their sin by those who do not care about the sin but only care about putting down anyone who stands for what is right. This is why he prays, "*Those also who render evil for good, they are my adversaries, because I follow what is good*" (v20). This is what repentance looks like. Contrition for one's sins but gladly turning to the Lord for forgiveness and deliverance and loving again that which is good (2 Cor 7:10).

When Yahweh is Salvation – "*O Yahweh, my salvation!*" There is something here that must not be missed. The gospel is not just that God saves us, but that God is our salvation. Jesus' name means, "*Yahweh saves*" but it also means "*Yahweh is salvation*." This means that even if the desired deliverance is delayed or does not come in this life, God Himself remains the continuing source of hope and salvation, now and into the future. This means that whatever your situation, if you are found in Christ, you are found in salvation. Something to sing about...