

WHEN SICK BECAUSE OF SIN

Psalm 38

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Psalm 38, I think, is a very unusual psalm. As I prepared for this Bible teaching, I was at one of those places I thought, “Lord, this psalm does not fit anybody I know at all. I don’t know how this psalm will connect, but I suppose it’s useful for us to know that it’s there, in God’s Word.” We may be able to use it with somebody else someday.

This is one of the things we do when we take the Bible sequentially. We take whatever’s there. Sometimes what’s there is a genealogy. Sometimes it’s a chronology. Sometimes it’s history and sometimes it’s a psalm that doesn’t particularly interface with us. I struggle at times with that approach to the Word of God. It’s always more scintillating to take theme approaches.

One of the great things this does, in going through Scripture, is ultimately we get a chance to be counseled by all the Word of God. We find how amazingly varied the Scripture is. How it fits every human life situation. Also, I think, by going sequentially through the Word, over a period of time we build up enough understanding of who God is that we’re not so easily swayed by every wind of doctrine that comes through.

I’ve entitled this psalm “When Sick Because of Sin.” Rather than read this psalm in its entirety at the beginning, let’s poke our way through it after the introduction.

Some introductory things that could perhaps be said about Psalm 38. For one thing, it is one of the seven penitential psalms out of the hundred and fifty. There are seven specific psalms to use when we need to confess sin. Out of those seven specific psalms, this becomes the third so far that we will have covered in the Psalter. The first is Psalm 6. The second is Psalm 32. This is the third one: Psalm 38. The fourth is Psalm 51, which is the most famous of the penitential psalms.

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Then later in the Psalter there's 102, 130, 143 and it's going to be a while before we get there.

It's good to have these psalms in mind when we need to pray our way through sin and wrong in our life. But not all the penitential psalms are appropriate for every particular kind of sin that we've committed. Psalm 38, perhaps, of the penitential psalms, is the most specialized. David in the psalm makes a frank admission that the reason he is ill is because he has sinned. And he is trying to cope with that. And deal with that.

I might just note the similarity for a moment between Psalm 6 and the penitential psalms. There are some dissimilarities and similarities. The first penitential psalm begins with the exact same phrase as Psalm 38, "O LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath." Someone has suggested that since that phrase is found more than once, perhaps it almost became a formula in prayer, that whenever you're under the heavy hand of God, it's well to express that kind of language in prayer to God.

A great dissimilarity between Psalm 6, the first confessional psalm, and this psalm is that in Psalm 6 there is not an indication that the suffering is a result of sin in David's life. In fact, the suffering seems to be more related to his enemies. But he admits wrongdoing. It's not the kind of bodily illness that's here, but it's also a psalm in which, when he's done, he has an assurance in his heart that God has answered his prayer and things are going to come out great.

Psalm 38 doesn't quite have that buoyant spirit. When David finishes praying this psalm, about the best he can squeeze out is one last call, "God help me." But there's no "Lord, I know that I've prayed this and victory's on the way." It's not that kind of a psalm. That suggests that those kinds of psalms become our favorites. We all like psalms and prayers that have better endings. The psalm, thirdly, is an honest psalm. It is a real soul wringer. As I worked through this psalm again and looked at it, I thought to myself, "Who in biblical days would have prayed this psalm

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in addition to David?” And, “Who could best benefit by praying from it now?” Several things struck me.

First of all, it appears that this psalm may have been used in temple worship by someone who was coming to present themselves to God after having been isolated for a period of time from worship and from the community because of their sickness.

In fact, the psalm is called “a petition.” Another translation for that is “a remembrance.” This psalm was especially recited by those coming to bring a sin offering or perhaps even a peace offering. They were coming to present themselves in the temple and this was the psalm that was appropriate for them to pray.

Another occasion that this psalm could have been prayed in, in biblical days, is the illness that is described as so far reaching and so devastating and so isolating in its nature—I think it would be an appropriate prayer for someone who had leprosy. Interestingly enough, David didn’t ever have that disease. But the other disease is so serious that it looks like it’s the end for him. It has devastating characteristics to it.

I thought of another contemporary application of this psalm, I almost subtitled this psalm “A Psalm for Penitent AIDS Victims.” If I ever have occasion to minister to someone who has the AIDS disease, who got it because of homosexual activity or wrongful sexual activity, this psalm is absolutely right down the line. It’s not for a non-penitent person. But AIDS, for most people who have it, is a direct consequence of sin. I would not suggest that AIDS is a divine visitation. God’s natural laws are at work, and when they’re violated, they are violated at a fearsome consequence. That’s the nature of all sexually communicable diseases. It’s the nature of man. Man is biochemically constituted in such a way that if you violate God’s laws with impunity, sooner or later there are consequences to pay for that.

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What is tragic is that infants suffer as a consequence. You've got babies suffering. This psalm is appropriate for penitent AIDS victims.

Then you may see additional applications as we go through it tonight.

One other thing, by way of introduction—I think I should say—obviously the Scriptures do not make a conclusive case for the idea that sickness equals or is always caused by sin. Job would not agree, for example, and would not pray Psalm 38. His detractors wanted him to pray the kind of language that is in Psalm 38: “Job, there's something wrong with you. That's why you are a festering mess. Confess your sin and God will heal you.” If they'd handed Job Psalm 38 and said, “Job, pray this.” He would have said “Not in a thousand years!”

The other thing, of course, is to compare it with John 9, where Jesus heals a man born blind—and people in Jesus' day were always quick, as they are in our day, to associate sickness with sin. “No,” Jesus says, “it wasn't because of sin.”

I think ill people get very sensitive consciences along with the illness. Therefore, this can sometimes be exploited or manipulated or they can have a guilt complex that takes on more responsibility than is theirs. I see the “faith teaching” often dumping a load of guilt on people that is just not fair, that in that weak moment of their life they have to deal with a lot of other things physically.

It may be that we're suffering from sinful action in our life. And the suffering that we're experiencing is not necessarily physical, but it could be psychological. If I have let sin into my life, whether its attitudinal sins or sins of unforgiveness or anger or whatever, there may be just some things happening to me psychologically and relationally through which I am paying a price. So I suppose, in a way, then, this psalm could be used when we find ourselves in that

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context, although we would have to spiritualize all the suffering here. Instead of actual physical suffering, we have to say, “My soul feels this way.”

The psalm divides rather easily into four basic parts.

I. The first two verses find David appealing to God.

“O LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath. For your arrows have pierced me, and your hand has come down upon me” (Psalm 38:1–2, NIV). It’s interesting here that David is convinced that God has visited him with judgment. Yet, even though he’s convinced of that, he is convinced of something deeper than God’s judgment. That is, that God will relent and that His mercy will stand above and beyond His judgment.

What does it mean when we talk about God being angry and God being wrathful? Are we talking about a God who gets emotionally ticked off? When we talk about God’s anger and wrath, are we talking about a heavenly deity who has emotionally ticked-off moments? It’s interesting how the Scriptures present His wrath. The wrath is somewhat impersonal in character.

That is to say it’s like the law of electricity. If I touch an exposed electrical wire, it doesn’t mean that the electrical wire got mad at me. But it means I violated a very fundamental law, and I am going to pay the consequence for that. The wrath of electricity is its shock or voltage. It’s not as though God is simply ticked off in the heavens. It’s that He has established, because of His character and holiness, certain immutable and unchangeable laws. He says, “If you violate those laws, you pay the consequence for it. In yourself, the consequence is separation from Me and it’s getting messed up on your insides as well. It will result, not only in alienation from Me and alienation within yourself, but ultimately in alienation from other people. It’s a law.” We violate God’s laws and say, “I don’t feel anything,” although we may not realize how God himself is

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withdrawing His presence from us. But as we go on and persist in violating God's laws, we bear the wrath that is a consequence of having touched the electrical wire.

David is realizing that in his body he has committed a sin that has violated God's justice and God has visited him with an illness. But the great thing is, in spite of being convinced that God is judging him, he still prays. He still gets on his knees or stands up and says, "God, I trust You enough that I'll pray to You, even though You're judging me at this moment." What he is doing by that is a very important act. He's saying, "God, I believe that You will be merciful to me." If that's not the case, then the prayer has no point. If all that God's going to do is keep raking him over the coals, then why even come to Him?

In spite of his sin and his present suffering, he's still calling God "Lord." As a pastor, I have occasion to talk to people who are going through deep valleys in life. They're facing the mystery of "why?" I always feel a quiet goodness in my spirit when I'm talking with someone who is struggling with horrendous problems, if I can still hear them—even if they are a little bit angry that the Lord has evidently allowed something to happen—say "the Lord." It tells me they're struggling with a problem, but they haven't abandoned their faith in the Lord.

That's where I see David at this moment. He starts off the psalm by saying, "Lord." That's always good—that we can have that kind of faith.

Arrows are painful to the body. David says, "That's how bad I feel. I am struck all over by God's heavy hand. He's got pressure on me. Not only am I hurting like crazy because of these sharp jabs in my flesh, but God's put His heavy hand on me. And I am pressured by Him." So right away, we see that this is not a very cheerful psalm. But sometimes in life things aren't too cheerful.

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II. The next part of the psalm is not simply David's opening appeal but we find, in verses 3–10, David's condition described. What is he really feeling like? What's going on?

“Because of your wrath there is no health in my body; my bones have no soundness because of my sin” (Psalm 38:3, NIV). I want us to take a moment, before I read on, to notice something in verse 3 that is an important complementary truth. On the one hand, David is saying, “Lord, You've taken away my health.” But in the next breath, he's saying, “It was my sins that did it.” So what he is actually doing in verse 3 is absolving God of wrongdoing. He's saying, “God, You didn't capriciously put this on me. But I did it to myself. “My guilt has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear. My wounds fester and are loathsome because of my sinful folly” (Psalm 38:4–5, NIV).

I personally wonder, as I read this psalm, if David, who was not the most moral person in the world, didn't catch some sexual disease. “I am bowed down and brought very low; all day long I go about mourning. My back is filled with searing pain; there is no health in my body. I am feeble and utterly crushed; I groan in anguish of heart. All my longings lie open before you, O Lord; my sighing is not hidden from you. My heart pounds, my strength fails me; even the light has gone from my eyes” (Psalm 38:6–10, NIV). Don't these verses describe a mixture of physical and mental pain?

I haven't had this twin blend of both physical illness and mental and spiritual tumult. Illness has been a straight-out illness. I don't personally know what it's like to have that blend.

It must have been exceedingly difficult for David to even have the strength to write this psalm.

When you're really sick, do you feel like writing? Do you feel like praying? All you can do sometimes is just groan. Yet David, as mentally and spiritually and physically sick as he is, has somehow the wherewithal to get this psalm written as a pouring out of his heart to God.

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The only consolation he has in all of his grief is that the Lord knows what's going on. That's the only good thing he can say, "My longings lie open to you. My signing is not hidden from you."

III. The third part of this psalm reflects the indifference of friends and the malice of enemies.

"My friends and companions avoid me because of my wounds; my neighbors stay far away.

[Now we're not talking about the indifference of friends. We're talking about the malice of enemies.] Those who seek my life set their traps, those who would harm me talk of my ruin; all day long they plot deception. I am like a deaf man, who cannot hear, like a mute, who cannot open his mouth; I have become like a man who does not hear, whose mouth can offer no reply. I wait for you, O LORD; you will answer, O Lord my God. For I said, 'Do not let them gloat or exalt themselves over me when my foot slips'" (Psalm 38:11–16, NIV).

In the Bible, and I think in life today, the foundations of living for the believer are two. Our relationship with the Lord and our relationship with other people. Anything else is pure gravy. If you've got a place to hang your hat and a car to drive and a job, that's great. But the real foundations are "where am I with God?" and "Do I have anybody to love and who loves me?" That's where the body of Christ obviously comes in. We're to be an extended family to one another.

What David is saying in these verses (38:11–16) is that both of these foundations have been affected because the prolonged illness begins to undermine both relationships. Prolonged illness brings with it the questions, "Does God care? Does God know?" And prolonged illness brings separation from others. One of the things Jesus taught us to do was to end the isolation on the part of the sick. That the sick are to be visited. He gives us, in fact, an encouragement in Matthew 25, that when we stand before Him in that great day, one of the things that He's going

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to be looking at is, did we visit the sick? He's not going to be concerned about the solos we sang in the church choir. He's most concerned about those acts of mercy that we're to be involved in.

Did you visit the sick? The Early Church was so concerned about this that they gave orders that the sick were to call and have people representing the church, the elders, pray for them. That there might not be this isolation. One of the good things I see happening in this church is the concern that people have for the sick and for people who get shut in and shut away. That's fulfilling God's plan and it allows people to not carry away in their heart what David is expressing here when he says, "My friends and companions avoid me. My neighbors stay far away." How awful that is. That ought not to be true of the body of Christ.

David, in addition to his friends being indifferent toward him, has a real problem with enemies. I suppose you have a problem with enemies if you're maybe in a position where you have responsibility and authority. I don't know. But why did David have enemies? He was a political ruler. David was in politics, so he had enemies. David finds himself without a comeback for his enemies. He says these words: "I'm like a deaf man who can't hear. I'm like a mute who cannot open his mouth." I'm so sick, and I hurt so bad, that I'm not hearing a thing they say. And I'm not saying anything back. I've been sealed off.

Here is a person who is really down in the dumps. If you get so down, if you're a combative kind of a person who's used to responsibility, and now you're so crushed that you're not even listening seriously about what people say about you negatively anymore nor are you willing to give them a zinger—you're hurting.

"So, Lord, You've got to come through. Don't let them gloat or exalt themselves over me when my foot slips." He takes his case to God.

IV. The last part of this psalm, the fourth part, finds us seeing David renewing his appeal.

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“For I am about to fall, and my pain is ever with me. I confess my iniquity; I am troubled by my sin. [That’s healthy, to be troubled by your sin. That is a very healthy thing.] Many are those who are my vigorous enemies; those who hate me without reason are numerous. Those who repay my good with evil slander me when I pursue what is good” (Psalm 38:17–20, NIV). Notice just a little bit of a fight there. Up until that moment in the psalm, he has been the one who has been in the wrong, but now he’s remembering he did do some good here and there along the way. And there are people who don’t hate him with good cause, but hate him without cause. I see maybe as part of David’s healing that he’s willing to stand up a little bit in his inner life. But he still knows that his real problem is not with his fellow man. It’s with God.

Both his pain and his enemies are unrelenting. So he makes the final appeal, “O LORD, do not forsake me; be not far from me, O my God. Come quickly to help me, O Lord my Savior” (Psalm 38:21–22, NIV). He has absolutely no solution for his problem. And he doesn’t see help as already having arrived. One of the things we’ve noticed in earlier psalms is that often when the psalmist is done praying, if the circumstances haven’t changed, at least the psalmist—David—feels like his own heart has gotten revived. So he can go out and face things again. Same circumstances but a different person facing those circumstances.

Here is a moment in his experience when he’s not quite so upbeat. He doesn’t have a lot of confidence but wonderful thing, he’s still asking for help. “O LORD, do not forsake me. Come quickly to my help.” And he will accept whatever the Lord may give.

Peter tells us, “Cast your care upon the Lord, for he cares for you” (1 Peter 5:7). We simply have to take the Lord at his word, that we can do that. And that He will give us His help and His aid. Obviously, David came out of that. We don’t know how, we don’t know where. We don’t know what process the Lord used to bring him out of it. But he came out of it and lived to write another

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psalm. It's good to remember that. There are times in our life when we may be just as near the ground as David, although for different reasons. But that doesn't mean that the Lord has quit helping us. And it does not mean that the Lord has forsaken me.

Closing Prayer

Lord, how heartwarming those words are to us. That we're never alone. That You do walk with us and You've never failed us yet. Lord, as we read this psalm, we can immediately think of people who, because of illness, are cut off from public meetings such as this. We take a moment to reach out and pray for them and ask that we can be encouragers to them. We ask that You will help us make the kind of right priorities in our life that find us fulfilling what You would like. That those who are sick with long-term illnesses or are shut in because of age will never be left alone by Your body. Make this church a continual healing source, a true fellowship of caring. Lord, we want to take a moment to pray for those whose sickness may be the result of direct moral sin and wrong choices. Lord, that there would be the same honesty in coming to You that is reflected in David's words. We have something that David didn't. We see You more clearly. We know that You have a word for David, in Psalm 38, that within his lifetime he did not yet see You. He did not hear that wonderful word on the basis of repentance, "Neither do I condemn thee. Go and sin no more" (John 8:11).

Lord, we thank You too for moments in our life when You are at work in us and we're maybe kind of scraping the ground, although for different reasons than David. That in the midst of that moment of our life, You're present. Thank You that we can simply reach out and call on You, Lord, without having the solution of all the dilemmas we may be facing. We have You to call upon, Your name to rely upon. Thank You for that. Thank You also for this wonderful supportive group of people tonight who are an encouragement to the church, to me, to Your work

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here. May each one feel that special visitation and presence of Your Spirit in their life tonight.

Thank You for Your love. Through Christ, our Lord. Amen.