

Horsley Evangelical Church (www.horsleyec.org.uk)

Minister: Rev Ken McIntosh 19th July 2020

Psalm 38 Godly Sorrow

Psalm 38 is traditionally one of seven *penitential Psalms* in the Psalter. In such Psalms, the writer confesses his sin and sorrow for sin to the Lord and asks for the Lord's mercy and forgiveness. And in this penitential Psalm, David tells the Lord about his sufferings and asks him for relief.

The title of the Psalm says it is "A Psalm of David. A petition." The original Hebrew reads more like, "A remembrance". David is *reminding* the Lord of his plight. This is not the first time David has brought his situation to the Lord in prayer. But in this Psalm he is *reminding* the Lord of his sufferings. He is bringing before the Lord once again his distress, so that the Lord will hear him and have mercy upon him.

Several commentators remind us that this Psalm would have been used in the temple as part of the regular worship of Israel when worshippers were called to confess their sins to the Lord and humble themselves before him. And this of course is part of worshipping God. Worshipping the Lord is not only about singing his praise and being joyful before him. Worship also includes times of expressing to the Lord a godly sorrow for sin, of humbling ourselves before him and seeking his face until he turns to us and shows us his mercy.

Let's look at this penitential Psalm this morning under 3 headings. First in verses 1-10 we find **David's suffering of body and mind**. David describes for us some illness he had as well as his anguish of mind. But almost from the very start we learn that these afflictions have come to David *because of some particular sin* he has committed. We are never told what this sin is, only that David's sufferings have come because of his sin and because of the Lord's anger against David and his discipline of David.

Now we need to be very clear right from the start that the Bible does *not* teach us that whenever we suffer some illness or distress of mind, this is because of a particular sin we have committed. Generally, pain and suffering *is* the result of sin. Pain, suffering and death entered the world *because of* the sin of Adam and Eve. And suffering is part of living in a fallen world. But that does not mean that if I have a bad headache for example, it's because of some particular sin I committed earlier in the day or last week. And there are many places in Scripture which teach we are not necessarily to make this connection. For example, when Jesus was asked in John chapter 9 who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind, the Lord answered that neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the work of God might be shown in his life. And then the whole book of Job tells us that the sufferings of Job did *not* come because of a particular sin Job committed. Sufferings often come from simply living in a fallen world.

But sometimes there *is* a more direct connection. And here in Psalm 38 there is a direct link between some sin which David has committed and his suffering. David is not just imagining this. This is not just a case of an overly sensitive or guilty conscience. No, this is an example of a man's suffering which is caused directly by his sin. The Lord is clearly disciplining David here. The Lord is angry with his servant David. And David is responding to the Lord's discipline.

He begins - **read verse 1**. The words 'anger' and 'wrath' are in the emphatic position in the Hebrew sentence, meaning that the Lord was *very* angry with David over something. And because of his transgression, the Lord was rebuking David as father would his son. God was disciplining David as one of his own children. And in this first section of the Psalm, this chastisement of the Lord was expressed in two ways – in David's bodily suffering and his mental anguish. Let's think first of *David's bodily suffering*.

Read verse 2. The Lord is pictured here as a warrior who has shot his arrow into David's body. And David feels pain because of the wound. Similarly, the Lord's hand has struck David with a heavy blow. And David is reeling from the Lord's chastising hand. **Read verse 3.** David's health is not good. The Lord has laid him low. He is ill, and the illness is not mild – it has penetrated into David's very bones. And David knows that this has come because of his sin.

Read verse 5. The Hebrew is much less polite. It describes David's wounds which *stink*. Anyone attending the king was well aware of the terrible smell in his room probably because of a nasty discharge. Those approaching him needed a mask and held their breath. And David knows that this suffering is because of his own foolishness – his sinful folly.

Read verse 6a. Being 'bowed down' could well refer to David being doubled up in pain. **Read verse 7, 8.** David, usually a strong and fit man has no physical strength left. He feels washed out. **Read verse 10.** Whatever the illness, it has affected David's pulse. He is aware if his heart beating hard within his chest.

But these verses also describe David's *suffering of mind*. The Lord's discipline has not only affected his body but also his peace of mind. If you like, David experienced mental ill health. His mind is not stable or at peace. **Read verse 4.** David's mind is flooded with guilt. David is made to rehearse in his mind over and over what he has done. And these thoughts are not like a steady drip. They are more like a flood which overwhelms him. David *feels bad* about his sin. There is no lightness in his spirit and no spring in his step. Instead his guilt presses down on his conscience like a heavy weight. David is not allowed to forget what he has done. Instead the Lord confronts him with his iniquity. He is made to feel just how serious his sin is in the sight of the Lord.

It is no light matter. David cannot just shrug this off as some peccadillo. No, he must understand the way the Lord 'feels' about this. For the Lord is seriously displeased with his son. Verse 6 could equally refer to David's state of mind. **Read 6.** There is no pleasure or happiness in David's life at all. Did he think that whatever he had done would make him happy? Did David think he could improve on the Lord's blessing upon his life? No, David is not having a good time. His days are filled with tears and bitter regret. **Read verse 8, 9.**

His 'sighing' is not just because of David's physical pain but also his bitter regret that he could have been so foolish as to have done whatever he had done. His longing is to get back to work and normal life and for the Lord to see how David had learned from his mistake and had reformed. But as yet, David has to wait. His longings lie open before the Lord - which means that the Lord has not yet answered David's petition. He has not yet allowed David to return to normal life. The Lord is still angry with David. He is still rebuking him.

Then in verses 11-20 we move on from **David's suffering of body and mind** to **David's suffering from desertion and malice**. The *desertion* comes from those he regarded as friends and the *malice* comes from enemies who try to exploit David's ill health. But in context, we must see these things too as expressions of the Lord's rebuke of David. Now normally, we don't interpret the desertion of friends or the malice of enemies as the Lord's displeasure because of specific sins we have committed. But in this particular Psalm we *are* to make that connection. Just as David's physical and mental suffering is linked with his sin, so too these difficult relationships are linked with his sin. The Lord's anger against David is such that he is causing friends to forsake him and enemies to turn against him.

First his friends. **Read verse 11.** If David's illness has affected his skin, then perhaps these friends avoid him in case he is infectious. David is therefore suffering from social isolation. Those he would have liked to visit him are either unwilling or unable to come. Some commentators refer back to the rules in Leviticus regarding infectious skin diseases, where the law of Moses forbade the infected person to be visited by others - they must be isolated. It's difficult to say for certain *why* David's friends stay away from him. But what is more certain is that this isolation *added* to David's suffering and was part of the Lord's discipline of him.

Then there was the malice of enemies. When they heard the king was ill, they sought to take full advantage of his weakened position. **Read verse 12, 16, 19, 20.** So here is added torment to David's already troubled mind. His enemies are making fresh plans to topple him. They set their traps. They talk of David's ruin. They speak their lies. They are vigorous in diabolical efforts when David is at his lowest ebb. And all this was very difficult for David to bear.

Now verses 13-15 have been interpreted differently by people. **Read verse 13-15.** Some interpret this to mean that the Lord has made David so physically weak and socially isolated that he is *unable* to defend himself. Even if he wanted to make his case known, the Lord has taken away his ability to do so.

But others interpret these same verses, 13-15, a little more positively as far as David's righteousness is concerned. They understand these same words to mean that David has *chosen* not to respond to his enemies but instead to trust in the Lord, believing that in time, the Lord will vindicate him. So - **read verse 15.** But either way, it speaks of a difficult time for David.

And so we have in this penitential psalm **David's suffering of body and mind, and David's suffering from desertion and malice.** And all because of the Lord's hot anger against his servant David.

But then the third heading of the Psalm is **David's solace in turning to the Lord.** This is seen particularly at the beginning and end of the Psalm. David can find no comfort or solace anywhere. There is no soundness in his body and no peace in his mind. There is no comfort from people – certainly not from his enemies, but sadly none from his friends either. David finds no solace anywhere – except in the Lord. And this is evidence that the discipline of the Lord is gradually turning his servant back to himself. Who knows where David's *thoughts* had been, what *company* he had kept or what his *body* had done to so anger the Lord. We are not told. But we are told how David found comfort and solace in the Lord alone. God has brought his servant low, but only to bring him back to his senses and back to himself.

This *solace in the Lord* is seen especially at the beginning and the end of the Psalm, but it is also seen in other places as David cries out in penitence and hope. **Read verse 1.** David accepts that he has done wrong. He accepts that he deserves the rebuke and discipline the Lord is bringing on him. But in verse 1 he asks that in judgement, the Lord will remember mercy.

But the very fact that David can pour out his troubles to the Lord like this is a comfort and solace. His friends will not listen to him, but the Lord will, even if he is angry with David. So David tells the Lord all about his suffering of body and mind and the anxiety he feels in the situation. And David finds solace in speaking with the Lord.

And in verse 9 David expresses the comfort of knowing that the Lord understands all about his condition. He knows the desires of David's heart – to be well again. He knows the prayers and petitions David has already made before him. **Read verse 9.** And then, however you interpret verse 13 and 14 we have David's hope expressed in verse 15. **Read verse 15.** And then there is the consolation David finds in confessing his sins to God. **Read verse 18.**

But then the final petition. **Read verses 21, 22.** The prayer is intense, and David addresses the Lord in four different ways. But these ways also express the comfort David finds in God.

The first word is *Yahweh*. "O Yahweh (LORD) do not forsake me." Yahweh is the covenant name for God. David knows he *belongs* to God and in the covenant the Lord has promised never to forsake his people.

The second way David addresses God is '*my God*' (21). David knows the Lord personally. He is not just 'God' but 'my God'. The third word is '*Adonai*' or '*Lord*' (22). The word means *ruler* or *sovereign*. "Come quickly to help me great ruler" prays David. David humbles himself before God and remembers that God is David's ruler - the ruler over all things. And the fourth word is *Saviour* (22). "Come quickly to help me, my Saviour." And in that name, David expresses the hope that once the discipline is over, the

Lord will restore him. David has hope that God will hear, restore and save. And so David finds solace in the Lord.

What can we learn from Psalm 38? 1. *God disciplines his own*. God hates sin and sin only provokes the holy wrath of God. And God will discipline his own children so that they may learn to hate sin too and love righteousness. Why does God discipline his children? The Scriptures tells us that God disciplines his children because he loves them. We find this in the Proverbs. [Read Proverbs 3:11, 12](#). And this Scripture is picked up and developed in Hebrews. [Read Hebrews 12:7, 10, 11](#).

David's suffering in this Psalm is only because the Lord loves him. If the Lord did not love David, he would not bother to discipline him. But the Lord does love him. And David, like all of us, needs to know that the way of sin does not prosper. Sin promises much but delivers nothing. David is being taught to associate sin with pain and anguish and alienation and anxiety. If you forsake the Lord then this is the way you chose, David. In the Lord alone there is life and peace and wholeness and fellowship and hope. But if you chose the path of sin and rebellion against the Lord, this is not the way of blessing.

And it's the same for you and me. We may not always know if we are being disciplined for a specific sin. But we do know that the Lord will discipline us because he loves us. We also know that the Lord works *all things together* for the good of those who love him. We may not always know why we suffer pain or distress, but we do have the assurance that God loves us and will work all these things for our eternal good.

2. We can also learn from this Psalm that we find our solace in God. Sometimes the Lord may take away the things we look to for peace and security, or else he may cause us to pass through a difficult time *so that* we may learn to find comfort in him and know his unfailing love. Our hearts need to be weaned off this world. Our hearts need to remember God, his salvation and the world to come.

3. But this same Psalm also remind us about the sufferings of our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. For while our Saviour had no sin, it was our sin which caused him to experience the same type of sufferings that David experienced, only far worse. Who knows the *bodily sufferings* that Christ knew because of our sin as he stood trial, was flogged, ridiculed and then hung on a cross. And who knows the *anguish of heart and mind* that Christ knew because of our sin as the shadow of the cross approached and he prayed in the garden of Gethsemane. And who knows *the pain of friends deserting him* and *the malice of wicked men* more than Christ knew. These sufferings of David in Psalm 38 then point us forward to the sufferings of Christ.

But we know he went through all this because he loved us. And any discipline is only because the Lord loves us. And so, as we work through the meaning of the Psalm we are reminded repeatedly of the love of God. All sin is serious. But in his unfailing love, God will deal with our sin. And therefore there is a place in worship for penitence and godly sorrow for sin, for the confession of sin and humbling ourselves before the Lord as we see David do. But as Christians, we know more clearly the provision God has made for us in his beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ to forgive our sin and finally deliver us from sin in the world to come.