

God the Rebuker, God Our Salvation

Psalm 38

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August 10, 2025

For those of you who don't know, I'm Tobias. I'm the Associate Pastor here at Christ the King, and it's my privilege once again to get to open God's Word for us this morning as we finish up in the next two weeks, today and next week, our series in the Psalms. And last week, we looked at Psalm 35. And if you were with us, you'll remember that in that Psalm, David was suffering unjustly at the hands of wicked men, and so he turned to the Lord and he prayed for deliverance. And the Psalm we're going to be looking at this morning, Psalm 38, is similar. You see, like Psalm 35, in this Psalm, David's once again suffering. He's at the end of his rope, and so we hear him turn to the Lord for deliverance. And yet, it's also very different.

You see, unlike Psalm 35, at the heart of this Psalm is David's realization that his suffering, at least the initial suffering he mentions, is neither unjust nor coming from the hands of his enemies. Instead, it's coming deservedly from the Lord Himself. And I think this made his suffering all the more painful. And, you know, I also think it's what often makes this Psalm and like it difficult for us to understand and to lean on in our own lives. Martin Luther said this about the Psalms. He said, "what is the greatest thing in the Psalter but this earnest speaking amid the storm winds of every kind? Where do you find deeper, more sorrowful, more pitiful words of sadness than in the Psalms of lamentation? There you look into the hearts of the saints as into death, yes, as into hell itself. And yet, that they speak these words to God and with God, this, I repeat, is the best thing of all. This gives the words double earnestness and life." Friends, I have no doubt that we'll see the earnestness of David's words as we read this Psalm, but will we see their life? That's what we need to see.

So, I invite you to open your copy of God's Word to Psalm 38.

"O LORD, rebuke me not in your anger, nor discipline me in your wrath!
For your arrows have sunk into me, and your hand has come down on me.
There is no soundness in my flesh because of your indignation; there is no health in
my bones because of my sin. For my iniquities have gone over my head; like a heavy
burden, they are too heavy for me.

My wounds stink and fester because of my foolishness,
I am utterly bowed down and prostrate; all the day I go about mourning.
For my sides are filled with burning, and there is no soundness in my flesh.
I am feeble and crushed; I groan because of the tumult of my heart.

O Lord, all my longing is before you; my sighing is not hidden from you.
My heart throbs; my strength fails me, and the light of my eyes—it also has gone
from me. My friends and companions stand aloof from my plague, and my nearest kin
stand far off. Those who seek my life lay their snares; those who seek my hurt speak
of ruin and meditate treachery all day long.

But I am like a deaf man; I do not hear, like a mute man who does not open his
mouth. I have become like a man who does not hear, and in whose mouth are no
rebukes.

But for you, O LORD, do I wait; it is you, O Lord my God, who will answer.
For I said, "Only let them not rejoice over me, who boast against me when my foot slips!" For I am ready to fall, and my pain is ever before me.
I confess my iniquity; I am sorry for my sin.
But my foes are vigorous, they are mighty, and many are those who hate me wrongfully. Those who render me evil for good accuse me because I follow after good.

Do not forsake me, O LORD! O my God, be not far from me!
Make haste to help me, O Lord, my salvation!" (ESV)

Friends, this is the word of the Lord. Let's pray.

Almighty God, we bow before you. Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer, we bow before you. We praise you, and we thank you for your word. Thank you for these words, the Psalm of David. We ask this morning that by your Spirit you will open our eyes and our ears to hear and to see what you would have us. Help us. Help us, Lord, to see what you speak to us through this psalm about our sin, about our need to confess, and about your faithfulness that you, as you were to David, you are our salvation. May we see that, Lord, and may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

Well, one of the things I've been trying to become more sensitive to as we've been going through the psalms for the last several summers is that this entire book, all 150 psalms, is actually a collection of five books. And I don't think we tend to pay much attention to this structure. It might be even a surprise to some of you today. Instead, I think we, myself included, we tend to read them as individual disconnected prayers or psalms or songs. But I'm coming to see that paying attention to the structure, this structure, actually helps us as readers. And that's because each of the five books tends to have a unique emphasis. You see, Psalm 38 is part of Book 1, which runs from Psalm 1 to 41. And these psalms focus especially on David. And on the one hand, this is obvious simply because David wrote all of them except for the first two. And yet there's more to it than that.

You see, these psalms don't just focus on David in a general sense. They hail him as the Lord's divinely appointed king. And they rejoice in the covenant promises the Lord made to him as king. And we can see this if we quickly turn to the beginning of this book, the beginning of the Psalter. And notice what he says in Psalm 2, verses 7 and 8. It says, "I will tell of the decree the Lord said to me, you are my son. Today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage and the ends of the earth your possession." Now, although this passage doesn't mention David's name, it's clear that that's who the Lord is speaking to. And these verses are recalling in poetic form the Lord's historical divine appointment of David as Israel's king, and the promises he made to give him the nations as an inheritance. And friends, this is helpful to keep in mind.

You see, when Psalm 38 is considered in light of this focus, the problems David was facing emerge as not less than, but more than just his personal suffering and struggle with sin, which is how this psalm is so often treated. In fact, they emerge as problems that were tied to the Lord's covenant faithfulness. And David rightly recognized that his awful predicament could raise questions about the Lord's character and reputation. After all, think about this. How could he, David, the Lord's own anointed king, how could he have become the object of the

Lord's wrath? What would become of the promises of an inheritance to him and to Israel, promises which had been made in solemn covenant by the Lord himself? What would happen to these were he to die in such a shameful fashion? Would they be canceled? And if they were, what would this say about the Lord's own ability to make good on his promises? You see, I think these are the questions that animated David as he penned these words. And yet, at the same time, the particular problems David was facing in this psalm also bring into sharp focus the more general condition we all face. And that is that we are all kings and subjects alike. We are all sinners before a holy God. Because of this, I think his prayerful response here teaches us how to respond faithfully to our own sin problem. And so with this in mind, I'd first like to highlight some of the key things in this psalm that give us a sense of what David was dealing with and how he responded to it. And then I'd like to draw out some of the more significant ways this psalm relates to us as followers of Jesus. So let's start. What was David facing here?

At the risk of a colossal understatement, verses 1 through 14 tell us he was facing a lot. First, he was sick. And it wasn't just the case of the sniffles or a mild headache. And it also wasn't just a metaphorical sickness, as some scholars suggest. No, here David was facing a gruesome and debilitating sickness. Notice how he describes it. In verse 5, he says he's got open wounds that stink and fester. In verse 6, he says he's become like a mourner, bow down and prostrate. In other words, he's already mourning his own death. In verse 7, he says his sides are burning. In verse 8, he says he's grown feeble and that he actually feels crushed by the weight of it all, and that all that he can do is groan because of the pain. In fact, later in verse 17, he says that his pain is ever before him. And in verse 10, he says that his heart is racing, his strength has failed, and he's weeping uncontrollably so that he can't see. I think that's the best way within David's context to understand him when he says, the light of my eyes, it has all gone from me. In other words, here David was brutally sick.

And for those of you who are curious, I doubt it's helpful to try to pinpoint from a modern medical perspective a single diagnosis like leprosy, for example. After all, his symptoms are too many, and they've affected his entire body, both inside and out, in his flesh and in his bones, as he says in verse 3. And I think Peter Craigie's right when he says that here, "David appears to have almost every disease in the book. The specific complaints are staggering in their proportions." And friends, this dreadful sickness was quickly and unrelentingly ushering him to his death. It is truly one of the most horrendous and difficult descriptions of sickness to read about in all the Bible. Bruce Waltke has this to say about it. He says: "Here, the psalmist enables his reader to feel his eventual numbness from his unrelenting pain by his unrelenting verbal depictions of them. No psalm depicts sickness in such an extended, numbing way. As the psalmist can endure no further suffering, neither can his audience endure further reading about them."

That just about nails it, doesn't it? And yet, that's not all David was facing. You see, the effects of his sickness were not isolated to his own physical torment. Instead, they extended outward and caused him to be shunned and even to be unjustly attacked by his enemies. Notice what he says in verse 11. He says, "my friends and companions stand aloof from my plague." And note the irony, "my nearest kin stand far off." But notice too what he says in verse 12. He says, "those who seek my life lay their snares. Those who seek my hurt speak of ruin and meditate treacherously all day long."

And friends, these were enemies of the worst kind, betrayers. Verses 19 and 20 tell us that David, as their king, had rendered them good. In fact, he was following the good. We can think about last week in Psalm 35, when David shared how he had tended to his enemies in

their sickness. But this didn't matter to them. They paid him back with evil and they hated him, as he says, wrongfully. And so taken together, the picture that emerges for us here is that David's sickness had left him utterly alone in his misery and vulnerable. It hadn't carried any compassion. He'd been abandoned by his family and friends and neighbors and what's more, his enemies had seized upon it as an opportunity to scheme and to finish him off.

And yet, as horrible as all these things were, it wasn't the physical pain of the sickness or that he'd been forsaken by his community or even that he'd become a target for his enemies that was worst of all. No, the worst thing David was facing was the realization that the sickness which had brought him so low and had caused him to turn to God in prayer and to cry out for relief from the pain, this sickness had been inflicted upon him by God himself. Listen to his cry as he begins to pray in verses 1 through 3. He says, "O Lord, rebuke me not in your anger, nor discipline me in your wrath, for your arrows have sunk into me, and your hand has come down on me. There is no soundness in my flesh because of your indignation." Friends, do you hear what he's saying? It should come as a shock to us. After all, last week as we looked at Psalm 35, we heard David call on the Lord to take up his weapons of war and to wield them against his enemies to their destruction. But here, David realized that the Lord's weapons, his arrows, and his mighty hand, they weren't trained on his enemies. Instead, they were trained on him.

And you know, I think this must have been the most terrible and confusing thing of all for him. I mean, how could he, the divinely appointed king of Israel, now have become the Lord's target? So, how did he respond? Well, for starters, he listened. He listened for what the Lord was seeking to teach him through his suffering. C.S. Lewis famously said in *The Problem of Pain*, "God whispers to us in our pleasures, he speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain." It is his megaphone to rouse a dead world. And friends, David was listening to the Lord's megaphone. And as he listened, what he came to understand was that his suffering wasn't an inexplicable attack by the Lord. Instead, it was his master's righteous rebuke. It was his father's discipline calling him to repentance because of his sin.

Notice what he says in verses 3 through 5. He says, "there is no health in my bones because of my sin. For my iniquities have gone over my head like a heavy burden, they're too heavy for me. My wounds stink and fester because of my foolishness." But he didn't just listen. He responded to the lesson he learned about his sin with humility. And you know, he didn't have to do this. He could have rejected any responsibility and passed the buck. And he even could have lashed out against the Lord in the midst of his pain. Proverbs 19:3 says, "when a man's folly brings him to ruin, his heart rages against the Lord." But David didn't do this. Instead, he said in verses 17 and 18, "for I am ready to fall and my pain is ever before me. I confess my iniquity. I'm sorry for my sin." Mark Futato says, "when there is pain in the body, there is often pain in the heart." Such is the case here.

And friends, it was from the pain in his heart that here David confessed his guilt to the Lord. He owned it. And he humbled himself to receive what he justly deserved as a sinner before a holy God, his own death. But there's one more way David responded to all this. He continued to pray and to unflinchingly trust that the Lord and the Lord alone would deliver him from his suffering. Listen to what he says in verse 15. He says with confidence, "but for you, O Lord, do I wait. It is you, O Lord my God, who will answer." Now we could be cynical about this. I mean, verses 13 to 14 tell us plainly that David's sickness had reduced him to a mere shell of a man, a man deaf and mute, unable to mount a defense against his enemies. And so we could say that David prayed to the Lord only because he had nowhere else, humanly speaking, to

turn. But this would imply that David had turned to the Lord only as a last resort. And friends, this is utter nonsense. After all, it was David himself who says in Psalm 60 verse 11, "O grant us help against the foe, for vain is the salvation of man." But there's even more to it than that.

You see, I think David, this man after God's own heart, continued to pray and to trust that the Lord would deliver him because he intimately knew the character of the Lord. He knew that he's a covenant-keeping God and that he is and always will be faithful to the promises he makes. And he knew that it was the Lord himself who had appointed him, who had anointed him as king over his people Israel and had promised him an everlasting kingdom and the nations as a possession. And yet he also knew that the enemies of the Lord, who had become his enemies through his sickness, would rejoice in his death as king, as he says in verse 16, and they would twist it in such a fashion as to call into question the power and the very character of the God he served. And he'd have none of this. In other words, I think it was David's jealousy for the Lord's glory, not his own, that led him, despite his own sin and responsibility, and despite his willingness to suffer death justly because of it, this is what led him to boldly pray and unfailingly trust that the Lord would not abandon him to suffer such a shameful death, but that he would instead make haste as his salvation.

And friends, of course, we know that the Lord did indeed deliver and restore David. He went on to rule Israel for 40 years, and his kingdom was firmly established as he passed it on to Solomon. And I have no doubt that this psalm was sung by later generations of Israelites, as the title suggests, as a memorial, a memorial to the Lord's enduring faithfulness, to the covenant promise he'd made to David, as they looked forward to the promised heir of David, the Messiah. So what does David's prayer here have to do with you and with me? After all, we are not David. None of us is the divinely appointed king of Israel, are we? And yet while this is true, we are all like him in one fundamental and undeniable fact. We're all sinners before a holy God, and it's in light of our identification with him as a sinner, not as a king, that I'd like to briefly highlight in the time we have remaining three things I think his prayer urges us as followers of Jesus to embrace in the midst of our own suffering.

And the first is this. It urges us to be attuned through the circumstances the Lord sovereignly brings our way to the reality of our sin. C.S. Lewis put it this way. He said, "One essential symptom of the regenerate life is a permanent, natural, and it seems unalterable, corruption. The true Christian's nostril is to be continually attentive to the inner cesspool." Now given that this psalm makes it clear that David fell physically sick at the Lord's hand because of his sin, I think we need to be careful here. You see, on the one hand, the Lord's response in John 9 when he was questioned about the man born blind and said, it was not that this man sinned or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him. Jesus's response here makes it abundantly clear that the things we suffer are not always because of our sin. We need to be careful not to run to the conclusion that the Lord is rebuking us whenever we catch a cold or suffer something worse.

Ellie and I once attended a church where a little boy who was running through the sanctuary, he tripped and fell. And when he got up, he said, "God spanked me." Maybe he had. Maybe he'd been told not to run through the sanctuary time and again, and the Lord was disciplining him. But friends, given the child and the circumstances, it didn't seem that way to us. In fact, it seemed more likely that this poor boy just lacked coordination in the moment, nothing more. And it struck both Ellie and me as a sad and fearful way to relate to the Lord. Almost as if this boy thought of the Lord as one who is out to get him at every turn. And so he blamed him when he could have turned to him for consolation and comfort as the God who

comforts those in need. Yet at the same time, like David in this psalm, we need to be open to the possibility that our sufferings are the Lord's rebuke. In fact, Jesus' own response to the paralytic in John 5, "sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you." This too makes this clear. And friends, in cases like this, in cases like David's, when the Holy Spirit, not someone else, when the Holy Spirit pricks our consciences through our suffering and brings to light things we've been hiding, the only proper response in the midst of our suffering is to confess our sin to the Lord, just like David did.

Secondly, I think David's prayer urges us to show compassion to those in need, even when they're at fault. You see, if ever there was someone in need of compassion, it was David in this moment. And yet, instead of garnering the compassion of his family, we've seen that David's sickness led them to abandon him in his misery, and it even led to condemnation and attack. And sadly, this is often the case in our own experience, isn't it? Friends, why do we let this happen? Why do we distance ourselves from the needy? Mark Furtado says, "perhaps the distance is a result of the fear of contagion. Perhaps the discomfort is the result of illness, is the result of illness confronting the healthy with their own mortality. And this repulsion from illness may at times even take the form of outright attack on the ill." But friends, this isn't what we're called to. We're called to emulate our Savior who moved toward the sick and the sinner alike in compassion, not away from them in disdain. And friends, when we do this, we can be, as Gerald Wilson puts it, "examples of God's forgiveness unleashed among his faithful community. Only in such a community can we really reflect the wholeness of God who desires all to know their sin as well as to experience his forgiving power. Otherwise, Christ our Lord has gone to the cross in vain."

Finally, I think David's prayer here urges us to look to Christ alone and to trust him for our deliverance. Perhaps you noticed that in both the beginning and the ending of this psalm, we hear David crying out to the Lord for healing. And yet what's especially significant to me about this isn't that they're similar. Instead, it's that they're different. After all, in verses 1 and 2, we hear David crying out to the Lord as God the rebuker. But in verse 22, we hear him crying out as "the Lord, my salvation." And I find this significant for one very simple reason. It beautifully captures the gospel. You see, through his suffering, David had come to understand the depth of his sin, the justness of the Lord's rebuke, and his utter inability to do anything about it. And yet he never despaired. Instead, he turned to the Lord. He trusted in the Lord's faithfulness.

Friends, what about you? Is David's experience your experience? Have you come to understand the depth of your own sin, the justness of the Lord's rebuke, and your utter inability to do anything about it? Friends, the measure of the Lord's faithfulness to save sinners isn't ultimately that he restored David to health. Instead, it's that he sent his own son, David's promised heir, to suffer far greater things than David ever had to endure. And he did this not because of his own sin, but because of yours and mine. And he promises that if we, in the midst of our suffering and the shame of our sin, would but turn to Christ in repentance and faith, then we, like David, can say with boldness as he brings this psalm to a close, "make haste to help me, O Lord, my salvation." Let's pray.

O Lord, we come before you echoing what we heard David echo. We are sinners. We are sorry for our sin, and we turn to you as our Lord, our salvation. O Father, send that truth deep down. May we cling to it and cling to nothing else. Thank you, Lord, for your word. Continue to strengthen us, nourish us, and grow us by it as we submit to it. We ask all this in the name of Jesus.