

“Sickness and Suffering”
Psalm 38
(Preached at Trinity, August 29, 2010)

I’m supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord’s Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I’ll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. **Psalm 38** is one of the seven penitential psalms which include Psalms 6, 32, 28, 51, 102, 130, 143.
In the superscription it is referred to as a Psalm of remembrance. The ESV and NASB translate it as a Psalm of memorial but this doesn’t get to the heart of the meaning. As David is laying on his sickbed he is calling to memory his sin. Elsewhere this designation occurs one other time in Psalm 70 where he is also in a time of affliction and calls to memory the greatness of God as his Deliverer.
2. The focus of this psalm deals with a terrible sickness that had come upon David. This was during a time of history when medical care was limited. Physicians had limited understanding of illnesses. They knew that some diseases were communicable but there was no knowledge of bacteria and viruses. There were no antibiotics and little by way of painkillers or fever reducers. Suffering during illness was often great.
David described his condition:
Psalm 38:6-7 – “I am troubled; I am bowed down greatly; I go mourning all the day long. ⁷ For my loins are filled with a loathsome *disease*: and *there is no soundness in my flesh.*”
3. In addition, David’s suffering was increased by the abandonment of his friends – **V. 11**. David felt the intense suffering of loneliness.
And on top of this, David’s opportunistic enemies were seeking to take advantage of the situation of David’s illness – **V. 12**.
4. This psalm brings up the whole question of the relationship between sickness and sin. It is true that not all sickness and suffering is the direct cause of personal sin. But it is certainly true that much of the sickness and suffering we experience *is* the result of our sin. This seems strange to the ears of many modern Christians. They assume that when they get sick it is just the ordinary course of life. There are viruses and diseases that we contract simply as an ordinary aspect of life. We get sick, go to the doctor, take medicine and hope for a speedy recovery.
The question before most Christians is, have you ever associated sickness or suffering with sin.
5. This psalm forces us to look at this subject again with honesty and an open heart.
6. I want to set this psalm before you under three simple headings.
The Cause of David’s Sickness
The Confession of David’s Sin
The Cry of David for Mercy

I. The Cause of David's Sickness

- A. It is clear that this illness was the direct result of sin.
1. In **Verse 3** David speaks of his sin
 “*There is no soundness in my flesh because of thine anger; neither is there any rest in my bones because of my sin.*”⁴
 2. In **Verse 4** he refers to his iniquities
 “For mine iniquities are gone over mine head: as an heavy burden they are too heavy for me.”
 3. In **Verse 5** David refers to his foolishness
 “My wounds stink *and* are corrupt because of my foolishness.”
- B. It is amazing how many examples we have in Scripture of sickness and suffering that are the direct result of sin.
1. There are numerous psalms where David connects his affliction with his sin.
 2. Miriam was smitten with leprosy because of her rebellious heart in speaking against Moses.
Numbers 12:10 – “and, behold, Miriam *became* leprous, *white* as snow: and Aaron looked upon Miriam, and, behold, *she was* leprous.”
 3. Uzziah, king of Judah was smitten with leprosy because he entered into the holy place reserved only for the priest.
2 Chronicles 26:16 – “But when he was strong, his heart was lifted up to *his* destruction: for he transgressed against the LORD his God, and went into the temple of the LORD to burn incense upon the altar of incense.”
2 Chronicles 26:20-21 – “And Azariah the chief priest, and all the priests, looked upon him, and, behold, he *was* leprous in his forehead, and they thrust him out from thence; yea, himself hasted also to go out, because the LORD had smitten him.”²¹ And Uzziah the king was a leper unto the day of his death . . .”
 4. In the New Testament we read that members of the Church of Corinth had been smitten with illness because they came to the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner.
- C. There was no doubt in David's eyes that his sickness was from God
Psalm 38:1-2 – “O LORD, rebuke me not in thy wrath: neither chasten me in thy hot displeasure.”² For thine arrows stick fast in me, and thy hand presseth me sore.”
1. This clearly demonstrates that we should not be oblivious to God's chastening
 2. How is it that the Christian knows the rod of his Father?
 - a. God knows how much rod to apply
 - b. We are not talking about goats that no amount of chastening will conform. We aren't talking about those whose consciences are beyond feeling.
 - c. The Christian is holy by nature. David's life wasn't filled with sin.
Psalm 38:20 – “They also that render evil for good are mine adversaries; because I follow *the thing that good is.*”
 (“I follow after that which is good”)

- d. It isn't difficult to notice sin in the life of a Christian. A splatter of mud on a white tablecloth isn't hard to discern.
 - (1) Sometimes we can be guilty of enjoying our dirty garments. They don't show dirt.
 - (2) We are commanded to wear the garment of Christ
Romans 13:14 – “But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to *fulfil* the lusts *thereof*.”
- e. God may use many means to expose us
 - His Word, preaching
 - The word of a brother (this is why we watch over one another – we should listen to the rebuke of a brother, a pastor). Nathan told David, “Thou art the man”
 - The Holy Spirit may convict us during prayer.
- 3. God's chastening would be of little profit if we did not understand the reason
 - a. It is an evil parent that continually strikes a child with reason. It leaves the child confused and full of wrath
 - b. God does not leave us without understanding.
- 4. Although every illness is not God's rod it often is.
 - a. We do know that no illness is without design. God is using all things to conform us to Christ.
Romans 8:28 – “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to *his* purpose.”
 - b. When sickness or suffering arises we must always seek what God is teaching us in it
Micah 6:9 – “The LORD'S voice crieth unto the city, and *the man of wisdom* shall see thy name: hear ye the rod, and who hath appointed it.”

II. The Confession of David's Sin

- A. David turned his heart to honestly confess his sin
Psalm 38:18 – “For I will declare mine iniquity; I will be sorry for my sin.”
 - 1. Again, not all sickness is the result of sin
 - a. God allowed Job's affliction to demonstrate to Satan that Job served God for who God is and not for what he received
 - b. God brought Paul's “thorn in the flesh” to show His power in Paul's weakness
 - c. Jesus said the man was born blind so that the glory of God might be displayed in his life
 - 2. David knew this sickness was the result of his sin and he knew the futility of seeking to hide his sin from God.
 He never forgot the words of Nathan – “Thou art the man.”

3. David knew his sin was the cause of his suffering
David openly confessed his sin before God
Psalm 51:3-4 – “For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin *is* ever before me. ⁴ Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done *this* evil in thy sight”
- B. God’s rod is designed to bring us to confession and repentance
1. James implies that sin resulting in sickness must be confessed and prayed over.
James 5:14-16 – “Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord: ¹⁵ And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him. ¹⁶ Confess *your* faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.”
 2. Confession must be a constant part of our life.
Listen to Paul:
1 Corinthians 11:30-32 – “For this cause many *are* weak and sickly among you, and many sleep. ³¹ For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged. ³² But when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world.”
- C. Forgiveness only comes with confession
1 John 1:9 – “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

III. The Cry of David for Mercy

- A. The wicked man flees from God – the righteous man flees to God
1. Even in the height of his suffering, knowing that it was the rod of God, he fled to God
Psalm 38:21-22 – “Forsake me not, O LORD: O my God, be not far from me. ²² Make haste to help me, O Lord my salvation.”
 2. David cries out:
Psalm 38:9 – “Lord, all my desire *is* before thee; and my groaning is not hid from thee.”
 - a. “O God, all of my longings are before you.”
 - b. My cries of suffering are not hidden from your ears
 3. David looked to his Father for relief. He cried out for God’s mercy. In **Verse 1** he doesn’t resist God’s chastening but pleads God’s mercy in the time of His displeasure.
Spurgeon: “Chasten me if thou wilt, it is a Father's prerogative, and to endure it obediently is a child's duty; but, O turn not the rod into a sword”
- B. Our cries should go out to God as a child to his father
1. After confession we cast ourselves upon the mercy of God
 2. “O God, I have been foolish. I deserve Thy rod. Have mercy O God and bring an end to my suffering.”

3. Again, listen to David:
Psalm 38:15 – “For in thee, O LORD, do I hope: thou wilt hear, O Lord my God.”
- C. God is not deaf to our cries
 1. His rod is meant to humble us
 2. He takes no pleasure in extending our suffering
 3. He stands ready to restore you in due time
James 4:8-10 – “Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse *your* hands, ye sinners; and purify *your* hearts, ye double minded. ⁹ Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep: let your laughter be turned to mourning, and *your* joy to heaviness. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up.”
1 Peter 5:6 – “Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time:”
 4. In humility we patiently wait upon God

Conclusion:

May the psalm remind us of two important truths:

1. No sin is without consequences. It may not result in God’s immediate chastisement but it always has a detrimental effect upon our holy lives.
2. Even during the chastisement of God’s displeasure He will never forsake us and He will never rebuke us in wrath.
 For the lost person his sickness and suffering is a token of God’s wrath and hot displeasure.
 For us even our suffering is placed upon us from the hand of God’s pure love for us.
 Satan’s arrows are meant to destroy our holy lives.
 God’s arrows are meant to humble us and conform us to His holiness.
3. May these things drive us to strive for holy lives – to flee every appearance of evil.