

Praying With The Psalmists: A Study in the Psalms, Psalm 38
Preached @ Harambee Church by Pastor Michael Gunn on November 9, 2008

"Pain and suffering is God's megaphone to a deaf world"
C.S. Lewis

Intro:

We continue in our series in the Psalms and come to a prayer that one commentator says is *"Evoked by the experience of sickness and the consequent sense of alienation from both God and fellow human beings."* It is in our despair that we come to God in prayer. Often that despair is a direct or indirect result of our own sin. We pay the consequences of a life lived apart from God and His word. I am not saying (as we will see) that all sickness is a result of sin, but our Psalmist today seems to be indicating that his is. Most of us live as though sin "isn't that big of a deal!" Many of us mitigate sin by both reveling in it and thinking that it has no real consequences, or by constructing a low view of sin and staying away from it. Both have damaging results that are often responsible for the predicaments we find ourselves in. Sin (living our lives by our own standards, and not God's) destroys life. We have been talking about the fact that God has provided us with a "Life-Giving Environment," but our choice to be our own god has led us to the many problems we have. When God said *"You shall surely DIE"* (**Genesis 2:17**), He wasn't giving humanity an empty promise, stated to inculcate fear, He was speaking reality. Sin will destroy you, and apart from Christ taking on our sin (**2 Corinthians 5:21**), we would remain completely alienated from God. So today we are going to look at Psalm 38 and how 4 prayers and three complaints can be worked together to form a proper human response to pain and to God. There are too many people who either want to blame God and be bitter, or gloss over the elephant in the room (Human Pain) and try to put on a "Religious Front," neither which helps us with our pain, or moves us toward God.

From the Head...

Prayer #1 (Psalm 38:1)

This psalm is very similar to **Psalm 6**, except Psalm 6 appears to be chronologically written after this Psalm since it appears to have a positive answer (cf. **Psalm 6:9-10; 38:21-22**). *"Hearing my plea"* may just mean that God is listening, and not necessarily that He is answering it. This prayer is a prayer for God to exercise His mercy in our lives. It is not a prayer to mitigate His discipline, but to be merciful while He disciplines. David appears worried that his illness is a direct result of his sin.

The question I have here is, does God have a right to be mad? How so? What is making Him so mad? We have made light of God's "Righteous" justice in this world, and in the lives of individuals who have chosen to reject Him and forge their own lives apart from Him. This includes religious folks who construct a self-made religion that brings the glory to themselves through their own efforts. We have been made to glorify God, and when we refuse to glorify God we (as collective humanity) will do whatever it takes to satiate a need that only worshipping God can truly satisfy. This idolatry is the heart of sin and the center of all human problems (murder, robbery, adultery, fornication, slander, addiction... see **Matthew 15:18-19**).

Apart from Christ we would be at the mercy of God, without the hope of salvation. David is properly requesting of God that which we don't deserve. Mercy is a stay of our execution. It is a pardon, and that pardon is the result of Christ's work on the cross on our behalf.

Complaint #1 (Psalm 38:2-8)

The Psalmist's complaint is his physical condition. This is an explanation of the pain and suffering he is in. The bible doesn't ignore human suffering; it does however let us in, and gives us insight into the suffering. Without meaning, and an ultimate purpose, our suffering is more than inhumane. Suffering has at least three reasons attached to it in scripture:

1. It demonstrates our heart condition before God (**Job 1:20-21**)
2. It enables God to be glorified in our lives (**John 9:3**)
3. It is a consequence of our sin (**Psalm 38:3**)

No matter why the author is suffering, he is aware of his sin, since suffering and death is a judgment for sin, whether that judgment is direct or not. As C.S. Lewis writes, *"Pain is a megaphone to a deaf world."* God's discipline can be painful, but His intentions are always to turn you from disaster; His final judgment.

Prayer #2 (Psalm 38:9)

The author's second prayer is one of recognition that God is sovereign and knows all of our sins and conditions. There is nothing that God doesn't already know. Our prayers aren't to tell Him what's going on, but to come to Him for our comfort and sustenance.

Complaint #2 (Psalm 38:10-14)

Whereas the first complaint outlined his physical condition, the second complaint outlines his mental condition and the loneliness that often accompanies severe illness. Loneliness is often more devastating than the illness itself. It reminds us

that the Lord needs to be our ultimate sustainer, comforter, and companion; but it also reminds us that those who are suffering with illness are severely lonely, and need us to visit them and encourage them regularly!

Prayer #3 (Psalm 38:15)

In the midst of his loneliness and pain, David declares his patience for the Lord, displaying a sense of contentment in the Lord (see **Philippians 4:11-13**). After all of our complaining and bitterness and hurt, God still is the only being who can truly comfort us. We may feel abandoned and crushed, but it is in these times that we take our pain to God in repentance and trust, or we sour in our faith and fall into further despair.

Complaint #3 (Psalm 38:16-20)

Here the author honestly admits the state of his failing faith (**v. 17** cf. **Psalm 73:2-3**). It is human to desire comfort and freedom from judgment and the world's pain. It is one thing to deal with sickness and loneliness, but now the author is dealing with interpersonal struggles and strife with his enemies. The stress caused by those who hate us may be the biggest single issue of hurt and strife in our lives. This author is struggling with illness, loneliness and the hatred of people in his life. His pain is real and honest!

Prayer #4 (Psalm 38:21-22)

The Psalmist ends with an acknowledgment that in spite of life's pain and trials, it is Yahweh alone who saves, and who is able to bring him comfort in the midst of his pain.

...to the Heart

God is continually working on the hearts of His people to rip out the heart of stone, and replace it with a heart of flesh (see **Ezekiel 36:22-27**). It is always in our best interest to be rescued from who we are and where we are going, and God, in His infinite love, will do what it takes to rescue us. He has demonstrated this reality by sending His one and only Son to take on our judgment of illness, death, pain, and suffering so that we are able to spend eternity glorifying Him.

Books for Further Study: Baker Commentary on the Old Testament, Wisdom and Psalms, Psalms Vol. 1-2, John Goldingay; Answering God: The Psalms As Tools For Prayer, Eugene Peterson; The Message of the Psalms: A theological Commentary, Walter Brueggemann, Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible, Dietrich Bonhoeffer; Praying the Psalms, Thomas Merton; Bread in the Wilderness, Thomas Merton, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 1, Peter C. Craigie, New International Biblical Commentary, Psalms, Craig C. Broyles, The Book of Psalms, Robert Alter, Psalms Volume 1, James Montgomery Boice, A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23, Phillip Keller

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