

THINGS TO BE REMEMBERED

PSALM 38

Main point: God's devastating judgment on sin ought to immediately encourage confession and repentance with the hope of forgiveness.

INTRODUCTION:

It was the worst news Paulette Moss could receive. At the tender age of 22, she was told, "Your baby boy did not make it." He would have been the second oldest in my family. Within a couple of years, I was born. Imagine waking up to a world of pain. An accident has happened...a rare disease has been diagnosed...a physical ailment won't go away...a family member has been taken. I know you don't like to think about such things, especially on a Sunday morning, but sometimes we don't have a choice. Or do we?

When sickness or suffering invades into your life, how do you know if it is the result of your sin or just a part of living in a fallen world? You might be astounded to realize how much sickness and suffering are inflicted by a loving God who chastens us for our sins. (Just ask King Uzziah, the believers at Corinth, or David).

The focus of Psalm 38 is about *the devastating consequences of sin and the only way out*.

Categorized as a *penitential* psalm, Psalm 38 is not a *song* you sing in church, but a *prayer* that you moan in private in the prison of pain. It is a hard, honest, transparent, emotional, burning red-eyed kind of prayer that miserable souls pray when *sick with sin*.

Bookended by a prayer at the beginning and the end (*vv.1, 22*), the fruit of David's sin caused him to feel a sense of loss and distance from God and others that we know all too well. You know that *sinking* feeling, don't you? When you lie, and that knot tightens in your stomach. Or, you react in the flesh and feel that sense of shame and inward conviction? Who has not felt *the paranoia* that wondered if everyone knew what you did? Perhaps I am speaking to someone whose fear of public exposure, and the consequences it could bring to your family and your reputation, prevents you from coming clean with God and others. Yes, if you are honest with your own conscience, you know the knock of that inward sheriff on the door of your soul, reminding you something is wrong, and you must do something about it. The question is, "what?" What are we to do? This psalm helps us see that confessing our sin to God is the only way out of the trap of fear and destruction we find ourselves in.

This psalm invites us to do what one does when you go to a *funeral*. Sit down. Be quiet. Look back—retrace. Grieve, and then endeavor to walk away from that funeral and live since you too shall go to meet God someday.

CONTEXT and PURPOSE:

The superscription of Psalm 38 tells us it was written **for a memorial**—which means *to bring to remembrance*. For whom? For you and me. That's what memorial services do, in part. They remind us about *what a loved one meant to us*—perhaps something they *said* or *did* or just *the way they were*. And in remembering the past, *we appreciate the present*. This memorial is meant to bring *to our remembrance* the misery of sin, and the divine discipline and rebuke of God. For this reason, Psalm 38 is really a blessing to us in three ways.

- **First, it teaches us about the holiness of God** (*what sets God apart from us*). David has a BIG problem, and the problem is *God's anger at sin*. David's opening plea is that Yahweh would calm down in His "**wrath**" (v.1), which describes *God's intense fury* that does not subside and is often unleashed on an epic scale. The "B" line of a parallelism in verse 1 completes the description of *God's wrath* and describes it as "**burning anger**." God has a *HOT displeasure* and a scorching, righteous indignation against sin because He is holy; this posed a problem for David, and it poses a problem for us too.

How so? Because God *hates sin* and *cannot* and *will not* live with sin.

Thomas Watson, the English Puritan, reminds us that...

"Sin is the only thing that God has [repugnance] against. God does not hate a man because he is poor or despised in the world; as you do not hate your friend because he is sick; but that which draws forth the keenness of God's hatred is sin. And sure, if the sinner dies under God's hatred, he cannot be admitted into the celestial mansions. Will God let the man live with Him whom He hates?...Till sin be removed, there is no coming where God is."

If you and I desire to live with God, we must deal with sin.

The kind of sin that David committed is not recorded, and it really doesn't matter because *all sin, every sin, and any sin* offends a perfect and holy God. God's wrath and burning anger sunk deeply into David's heart like **arrows** released from a powerful bow in war. You've seen those old battle scenes when a regime of troops unleashes hundreds of arrows in the sky, which fall furiously on the enemies like hail. Some fasten to their shields, others lacerate the legs, and others fatally sink deeply into a man's chest, neck, or stomach. Arrows were very tormenting and destructive tools, and this is how David thinks of God's chastisements (*Job 6:4*).

David also sees God's chastisement as His "**hand**" pressing down on him. The verbs of the two clauses in verse 2 are both active and passive. God's sharp infliction has sunk down deep into him and has "*pressed down*" on him. Together they reveal that David sees his affliction as coming from the hand of God (*Ps.32:4; 39:11*).

This is both a *correction* and a *comfort* for us. The false idea being corrected for you and me is that we can get away with sin or at least turn from it on our own. *We can't* and *we won't*, so this is why affliction is sometimes the lever to move us back where we need to be. The comfort is that the same God who is offended by sin, also draws near to the repentant (*vv.18, 21*) and provides salvation (*v.22*). This is what makes God distinct, different, and holy.

- **Second, it reminds us of the misery of sin.** The 1990 psychological thriller based upon Stephen King's novel, *Misery*, was directed by Rob Reiner and starred James Caan and Kathy Bates. Caan is a successful author who, while traveling from Silver Creek, Colorado to his home in New York City, is caught in a blizzard, and his car goes off the road, rendering him unconscious. A nurse named Annie Wilkes (played by Bates) finds him and brings him to her remote home. And the *misery* begins. Already with a broken leg and a dislocated shoulder, the novelist awakens in the home of Annie. She knows all about him, but he knows nothing about her...and won't tell you the whole story. But Annie is just a little crazy. When he tries to escape but fails, she straps him to the bed and breaks his ankles with a sledgehammer—and the misery continues. Dear friends, the misery of sin is a thousand times worse. Beginning in verse 4, David unveils *how sin and guilt feel*. Sin and guilt are like *a heavy burden* that crushes us (*v.4*). In verses 5-8, the physical effects are pictured. It is like a *festering wound* (*v.5*); it makes

one feel *low and dark* (v.6). The burden of sin *burns on the inside*, and the whole body feels the strain (v.7). In verse 8, *the insides feel faint*, and *the spirit is crushed*, and even if things look quiet on the outside, *the mind roars* over the torment in one's heart. In verses 9-14, the nails of sin *sap the strength*, *sadden the countenance*, and *impact relationships* with family and friends—so that we feel *shunned* by those we love. It even gave occasion for *David's enemies to attack him* (vv.12, 16). Sin brings misery.

At this point, I must ask you to pause with me and think about this question: Why is there not an unburdening of all the guilt of sin when these things are obvious? Stubbornness? Blindness? Foolishness? What's so dangerous about sin is not only the misery it brings but the blindness to its cause. Psalm 38 blesses us the way a warning sign diverts our course so that we avoid painful experiences due to our own sin.

- **Third, it shows us how to pray.** Psalm 38 ushers us into the *physical* and *emotional* atmosphere of David's life and soul that we might participate in his prayer. But Psalm 38 also shows us that *despite our despair*, the righteous, no matter how deep the pain, *continue to seek God in prayer*. Now, what is the logic of this? It makes no sense to do this when it is, in fact, God who is causing the pain. But here it is highlighted for us again how true faith looks in the life of the righteous. Our trust is not fueled by what God gives to us, but who God is to us. And one of the ways saving faith is seen in our lives is that the Spirit convinces us that *the God who judges our sin* is also our loving and merciful heavenly Father. Peter Craigie says, "it is this rock-bottom conviction that God cares which prompts this prayer." It is out of love that God inspires David to write this psalm so that we understand who He is (holy), what sin does, and how to find our way out.

This psalm easily divides into four stanzas and frames *a prayer for mercy, for relief, of confession, and for help*. David would have us to remember four things about *sin and its effects*.

EXPOSITION:

A. DAVID'S CRY (vv.1-4)—SIN OVERWHELMS YOU WITH GUILT.

Sin is not the cause of every illness. In this case, however, David's illness is the result of his iniquity. He tells us as much in verse 3, "...*there is no health in my bones because of my sin.*" Verse 4, "*For my iniquities are over my head...*" I am literally overwhelmed by the guilt of my bad behavior. Verse 5, "*My wounds grow foul and fester because of my folly.*" This psalm opens with a dual plea to God, and the reason for his plea is traced back to his sin and God's judgment on it. Notice, first how...

1. He requests relief. (vv.1-2)

- ¹LORD, rebuke me not in Your wrath,
And chasten me not in Your burning anger.

David felt as if God had taken him to the woodshed and was giving him a good old fashioned whippin'! And God's discipline in David's life felt awful. It was like a sharp-pointed arrow of rebuke that had drawn blood.

- ² For Your arrows have sunk deep into me,

Job mentions this same kind of feeling under the trial that he went through but for different reasons.

- **Job 6:4**—For the arrows of the Almighty are within me,
Their poison my spirit drinks;
The terrors of God are arrayed against me.

It was like God was at war with David, and His hand had come down out of heaven and was squeezing the vitality out of his life so that his conscience had no rest.

- And Your hand has pressed down on me.

David is not in the dark, so what does he do?

2. He recognizes his sin. (vv.3-4)

- ³ There is no soundness in my flesh because of Your indignation;
There is no health in my bones because of my sin.

“**Flesh and bones**” in verse 3 is a blanket description highlighting both the outer and inner misery that consumed his life.

If you have ever had a broken bone and tried to put weight on it, you know how painful and unstable it felt. Well, David’s whole life felt this way. His bones had “**no health**” (*salom*) or *uninjured spot*, and his body had “**no soundness**,” or completeness or wholeness. This same description is used of Israel to describe the nation’s spiritual sickness.

- **Isaiah 1:5-6**—Where will you be stricken again,
As you continue in *your* rebellion?
The whole head is sick
And the whole heart is faint.
⁶ From the sole of the foot even to the head
There is nothing sound in it,
Only bruises, welts and raw wounds,
Not pressed out or bandaged,
Nor softened with oil.

Because Israel refused to repent, no healing came. Sin can harden us to the point that we refuse the medicine the doctor orders. But David recognizes his sin—and if we do the same, God stands ready as a Great Physician to pour the oil of grace into our wounded lives. Now, add to his physical consequences, the mental torment of guilt in verse 4,

- ⁴ For my iniquities are gone over my head;
As a heavy burden they weigh too much for me.

Here we see a man totally *absorbed*, *consumed*, and *burdened* by the effects of sin and God’s discipline. God’s anger was crushing him. He was perfectly miserable. A double metaphor is used to underline the point. Like waves rolling over his head, the tidal wave of guilt overwhelms him. His sense of his sins was sinking him down like having a huge boulder tied to his neck and being thrown into the Pacific Ocean. What do we do when sin overwhelms you with guilt?

James Montgomery Boice once said there are four questions you should ask when suffering from illness or experiencing trials.

1. Have I sinned or gotten off track of obedience to what I know I should be doing, and is this setback God's way of getting me back on track and into fellowship with Him?
2. Is God using this to trim off some rough edges of my personality and develop a more Christ-like character in me?
3. Is God using my suffering as a stage upon which His name and wisdom may be glorified?
4. Is it a place for me to show that I love Him for who He is, entirely apart from whatever material and physical benefits He may have given me?

You may not be overwhelmed by guilt today, and then again, you might. David's cry of acknowledgment shows us the first thing to remember—so that we avoid going that way again. Sin not only overwhelms us with guilt, but sin also...

B. DAVID'S CHASTENING (vv.5-16)—SIN CREATES HAVOC IN YOUR LIFE.

The effects of David's sin and its consequences are *staggering*. We all remember ground zero at the World Trade Center on 9/11 after the terrorist attack. Nothing remains as it was. Sin can wreak that kind of havoc in our lives. Like an Arizona wildfire, it is all-consuming and devastating! Verses 5-10 focus on *the physical consequences* and verses 11-16 reveal *the social and relational consequences*.

1. The physical consequences (vv.5-10)

a. His wounds are open. (v.5)

- ⁵ My wounds grow foul *and fester*
Because of my folly.

His wounds are *generating pus* and an *offensive* smell. They "**fester**," which pictures this running discharge. All of this points to the extreme suffering that David was under. David admits, all of this is happening because of "**my folly**." Not because of ignorance, but literally, the word "**folly**" means that he has been a downright fool—a fat-headed, flippant person who refuses to take God seriously. How seriously are we taking God today? The implication is that David's sin was a conscious *flouting* of moral rectitude, which he now regrets as silly beyond words.

b. His spirit mourns. (v.6)—He is doubled over by abdominal pain, and his demeanor is downcast like that of a mourner.

- ⁶ I am bent over and greatly bowed down;
I go mourning all day long.

c. His stomach burns. (v.7)—His loins burning possibly describes ulcers, where he felt like his insides were on fire.

- ⁷ For my loins are filled with burning,
And there is no soundness in my flesh.

d. His heart groans. (v.8)

- ⁸ I am benumbed and badly crushed;
I groan because of the agitation of my heart.

His body was a wreck, he is utterly *crushed*, and all he can do is respond with inarticulate groans and sighs. Here is a man in dire straits! By the way, what's your game plan if you ever find yourself here?

e. His soul sighs. (v.9)

- ⁹ Lord, all my desire is before You;
And my sighing is not hidden from You.

Verse 9 provides a glimpse of hope. The longing desire he is unable to express, *God is still able to understand* since his "**desire**" lies open "**before**" God and "**is not hidden**" from Him. Because our secrets are known to God, and He is a God who *forgives*, tell Him all about your fears for the past, your anxieties in the present, and your concerns for the future.

Can you judge a man's character by his desires? I believe the answer is yes! If you desire to do wrong, then that says something about you. But if you desire to *please God* and *know Him*, then God sees it. Express it to Him today, and remember that Jesus said, "*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied*" (Matt.5:6). It is a sign of life because it leads to God.

f. His strength fails. (v.10)

- ¹⁰ My heart throbs, my strength fails me;
And the light of my eyes, even that has gone from me.

So heavy were the effects of these sorrows that his heart pounded under duress. He had no ability to muster strength or to even see clearly, for the very light of his face grew dim as his countenance diminished. Are these physical afflictions enough to give you pause about sin? If not, David goes on to describe...

2. The relational consequences (vv.11-16)

When the bottom drops out in our lives, we naturally hope that family and friends will check in on us, and at least, pray for us. But David was left isolated.

a. His friends and family leave. (v.11)

- ¹¹ My loved ones and my friends stand aloof from my plague;
And my kinsmen stand afar off.

When friends and family are slow in helping, foes are most busy. So, we should be quick to help those in need.

b. His foes conspire. (v.12)

- ¹² Those who seek my life lay snares *for me*;
And those who seek to injure me have threatened destruction,
And they devise treachery all day long.

When our sin is private, it can eat us alive from the inside. But when it becomes public, then your enemies come out like vultures surrounding a dying animal, and they will not depart until every bone of your soul is picked clean! "Don't invite the vultures," is the word for the wise!

c. His hearing and speech fail. (vv.13-16)

- ¹³ But I, like a deaf man, do not hear;
And *I am* like a mute man who does not open his mouth.
¹⁴ Yes, I am like a man who does not hear,
And in whose mouth are no arguments.

Beset within and *without*, consumed with the pain of his sickness and the deterioration of his relationships, David is unable and unwilling to speak. He cannot defend his actions, and the enemy's accusations harass him, so he tries to shut them out by acting as if he is deaf and mute. What do you do when you are unable to answer your accusers? You wait for God to act as your defender and vindicator.

- ¹⁵ For I hope in You, O LORD;
You will answer, O Lord my God.
¹⁶ For I said, "May they not rejoice over me,
Who, when my foot slips, would magnify themselves against me."

Most of us have been spared this kind of havoc, but that's only because of God's mercy. David calls us to remember, sin overwhelms with guilt and creates havoc in our lives. If you find yourself in this place, David now reveals the ONLY way out.

C. DAVID'S CONFESSION (vv.17-20)—SIN MUST BE CONFESSED AND FORSAKEN.

The king has reached a *crisis point*. Sometimes God brings us to the *brink* before He *blesses*. He feels vulnerable and out of control, but it leads him finally to a full confession of sin.

- ¹⁷ For I am ready to fall,
And my sorrow is continually before me.
¹⁸ For I confess my iniquity;
I am full of anxiety because of my sin.
¹⁹ But my enemies are vigorous *and* strong,
And many are those who hate me wrongfully.
²⁰ And those who repay evil for good,
They oppose me, because I follow what is good.

What is the way out and back?

- **Proverbs 28:13**—He who conceals [*Like Adam trying to hide behind fig leaves—Job 31:33*] his transgressions will not prosper,

But he who confesses [admitting with the mind] and forsakes [rejecting with the heart] *them* will find compassion.

God does not need confession for His own info, but He demands it for our good. If our hearts are repentant, we will pray like that godly man Job,

- **Job 34:32**—Teach me what I do not see;
If I have done iniquity,
I will not do it again?

Things to be remembered—Sin overwhelms with guilt. Sin creates havoc. Sin must be confessed and forsaken. Finally,

D. DAVID'S CALL (vv.21-22)—SIN REMINDS YOU THAT YOU NEED A SAVIOR.

- ²¹ Do not forsake me, O LORD;
O my God, do not be far from me!
²² Make haste to help me,
O Lord, my salvation!

David's final call is expressed in the language of *urgency*. Please don't abandon me! I need You, Lord, now! God, come near and come now. His need is great, and there is only One source of hope—the delivering God!

- Is your strength spent?
- Is your hope of self-deliverance gone?

What God *was*, that He is. John Bradford (1510-1555) was an English Reformer who was imprisoned in the Tower of London for alleged crimes against Mary Tudor. He was burned at the stake on July 1, 1555. He used to say whenever he saw a man go by his window to be hanged,

"Ah! There goes John Bradford if the grace of God had not prevented."

Spurgeon said, "Keep in remembrance the patience of God in enduring with you, the power of God in restraining you, the love of God in instructing you, and the goodness of God in keeping you to this day."

CONCLUSION:

Psalm 38 cautions you and me who sin, not to *let our fear of discovery and the attacks of those who are looking for a chance to humiliate us*, prevent us from acknowledging our sins and experiencing the gracious forgiveness of God. David shows us that THE ONLY WAY out of this trap of fear and destruction is to confess and repent of sin.

There is great power in the application of 1 John 1:9—"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

Let me address those hindrances which prevent the reception of these truths.

- Some may think they have sinned beyond all hope. The cross of Jesus says there is hope for you if you repent.
- Others may think the cost of coming clean is too great. God has paid the ultimate cost in His Son's life. Is the cost of your pride greater than the sacrifice of His blood?
- Still, others may think this is only for those who have hit rock bottom. David wrote this so that you never have to feel the bottom. But you must heed the Holy Spirit's warning. There is a better way forward, and that way is through a personal relationship by faith in Christ. He remembered you on the cross. Now, will you remember Him?

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