

PSALMS

Chapter 38

O LORD, rebuke me not in your anger, nor discipline me in your wrath! ²For your arrows have sunk into me, and your hand has come down on me. ³There is no soundness in my flesh because of your indignation; there is no health in my bones because of my sin. ⁴For my iniquities have gone over my head; like a heavy burden, they are too heavy for me. ⁵My wounds stink and fester because of my foolishness, ⁶I am utterly bowed down and prostrate; all the day I go about mourning. ⁷For my sides are filled with burning, and there is no soundness in my flesh. ⁸I am feeble and crushed; I groan because of the tumult of my heart. ⁹O Lord, all my longing is before you; my sighing is not hidden from you. ¹⁰My heart throbs; my strength fails me, and the light of my eyes—it also has gone from me. ¹¹My friends and companions stand aloof from my plague, and my nearest kin stand far off. ¹²Those who seek my life lay their snares; those who seek my hurt speak of ruin and meditate treachery all day long. ¹³But I am like a deaf man; I do not hear, like a mute man who does not open his mouth. ¹⁴I have become like a man who does not hear, and in whose mouth are no rebukes. ¹⁵But for you, O LORD, do I wait; it is you, O Lord my God, who will answer. ¹⁶For I said, “Only let them not rejoice over me, who boast against me when my foot slips!” ¹⁷For I am ready to fall, and my pain is ever before me. ¹⁸I confess my iniquity; I am sorry for my sin. ¹⁹But my foes are vigorous, they are mighty, and many are those who hate me wrongfully. ²⁰Those who render me evil for good accuse me because I follow after good. ²¹Do not forsake me, O LORD! O my God, be not far from me! ²²Make haste to help me, O Lord, my salvation!

Ps 38 An urgent appeal for relief from a severe and painful illness, God’s “rebuke” for a sin David has committed. Neither the specific occasion nor the illness can be identified. David’s suffering is aggravated by the withdrawal of his friends (see v. 11) and the unwarranted efforts of his enemies to seize this opportunity to bring him down (vv. 12, 16, 19–20). In traditional Christian usage, this is one of seven penitential psalms. Like Ps 33 its length (22 verses) is based on the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet. The psalm is composed of five stanzas of four verses each, with a two-verse conclusion. (CSB)

One of seven penitential psalms. Jewish tradition has the second half of the psalm as a liturgical prayer that accompanied the offering of Azkarah (memorial; cf Lv 24:7; Ps 70:1). David knows he has sinned and attributes his suffering to God’s wrath.

Format: Vv 1–2, the Lord’s discipline; vv 3–4, heavy iniquities; vv 5–8, my sinful condition; vv 9–11, alone in my suffering; v 12, my foes; vv 13–14, deaf and mute; vv 15–16, waiting for the Lord; vv 17–20, confession; vv 21–22, plea for help. (TLSB)

David is pleading with the Lord to remember his gracious promises to him, to forgive his sins and to deliver him from his enemies. This psalm shows us that even true believers may feel crushed by physical pain and spiritual anguish in time of suffering and trial. Such anguish is not necessarily a sign of unbelief. Indeed, those with very sensitive consciences like David may be most prone to such agonizing self-reflection. If you are ever crushed with such pain in your life, recognize such afflictions as a powerful testimony of the awfulness of sin. Accept even these sufferings as a warning from the Lord, given in love and intended for your good. But, like David,

cling to God's promises and pray fervently to him for relief in the time and hour which he knows best. (PBC)

38 title *A petition* – Occurs elsewhere only in the title of Ps 70. (CSB)

38:1–4 Plea for relief from the Lord's rebuke. (CSB)

38:1 *rebuke ... discipline*. That is, rebuke-and-discipline. (CSB)

David prays to be delivered from his deserved punishment from God. He prays for God's mercy to replace His heavy hand of wrath. (TLSB)

anger ... wrath – Because he is conscious of his sins, most likely of his adultery with Bathsheba and his murder of Uriah, David feels that the adversity he is suffering is an expression of God's wrath. Although it was true that many of David's afflictions came as a result of his sins, these afflictions were not punishments for sins handed out by an unforgiving God, but chastening corrections from a loving Father. (PBC)

38:2-8 David's argument as to why God should hear his plea. Vv 3, 5–8 describe the totality of his affliction. All is not right between David and the Lord; the illness is punishment for sin. (TLSB)

38:2 *arrows* – A vivid metaphor for God's blows (see Job 6:4; 34:6; La 3:12; Eze 5:16). (CSB)

This probably refers to David's final sickness near his life's end, but it may refer to some other unknown occasion in his life. (PBC)

your hand has come down upon me – The affliction that was sent by God penetrated his very being and it weighted heavily upon him. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

38:3 *no soundness* – God may chastise us physically. (TLSB)

38:4 *my iniquities have gone over my head* – The text does not state the complete image being used here, but it seems most likely he using the idea of a flood (Pss. 18:4-5; 69:2). His iniquities would therefore be compared to deep flood waters that have engulfed him and he is drowning. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

burden – Not only a psychological "burden of guilt," but the heavy burden of suffering described in vv. 5–8. (CSB)

Psychological and physical effects of his sin are described in vv 5–8. While this may not be confession, it is a sober acknowledgment. Sin is (1) a tyrant that constantly draws the sinner toward evil, while (2) simultaneously pushing downward, more and more increasing the pressure of sin, which (3) can result in bodily penalties and evils that go beyond our capacity to cope or turn back (cf Jer 10:19). (TLSB)

The spiritual anguish he feels is because of his sins. It is likely that this refers to pangs of conscience he still felt concerning his sins of murder and adultery years after he had committed them. This anguish became especially sharp when his sons Absalom and Adonijah plotted against him, because David was aware that his own sins had been responsible for the turmoil and unhappiness in his family. (PBC)

38:5–8 The devastating physical and psychological effects of his illness. (CSB)

38:5 *my wounds and fester* – Sin corrupts the whole body. Luth: “The sores are pride and the inborn sickness and remains of original sin. For that reason man is now swollen by nature and automatically stinks, that is, he creates scandal and is dissolved with festering” (AE 10:178). (TLSB)

because of my foolishness – It hurts to know that this pain has come about because of his own foolishness and not because of attacks of an enemy. When we repent, God promises to forgive and deliver us, although he does not promise to undo all of sin’s consequences. Sometimes we carry the effects of our sin throughout all our life. And yet, even then our Lord will in grace help us endure them. (LL)

38:6 *I am utterly bowed down* – David is unable to raise himself to an upright position and suffers such pain that he mourns all his waking hours. (TLSB)

The verb “bowed” has the sense of being distorted, writhing, or convulsing. He is basically bent over, perhaps because of the pain. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

38:7 *my aides are filled with burning* – Various translated as back, loins, or side. No small affliction affects his tender flesh. (TLSB)

38:8 *I am feeble and crushed* – Feeling of desolation attacks his whole being. (TLSB)

38:9–12 Renewed appeal, with further elaboration of his troubles: his illness (v. 10), abandonment by his friends (v. 11) and the hostility of his enemies (v. 12). (CSB)

38:9 *all my longings* – The Lord hears his groaning. He does not despise or abhor his words. The penitent confesses his sins and asks for Absolution. (TLSB)

my sighing is not hidden from you – It is a great comfort to him in the time of his affliction that God is intimately aware of every roaring complaint and every soft moan. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

38:10 *my heart throbs* – 1 John 3:19,20, “*This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence²⁰ whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.*”

light has gone from my eyes – The image of the loss of light of his eyes indicates that he no longer has clear perception. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

38:11-14 Describes the betrayal of his false friends. (TLSB)

38:11 *stand aloof* – Psalmist’s friends move from before him to contemplate their decision. Then they place themselves at a distance. Christ’s friends did the same. Augustine: “To those who wished to be near [Christ’s] exaltation, yet thought not of His humility, He answered and said to them, ‘Can you drink of the cup that I shall drink of?’ ... They ‘drew nigh’ in the body, but ‘stood afar off’ in their heart” (NPNF 1 8:107–8). Cf Mt 20:22. (TLSB)

38:12 Depicts a courtroom scene, where false witnesses condemn an innocent victim. (TLSB)

38:13–16 Let the Lord answer (v. 15) my enemies. Like a deaf-mute, David will not reply to his enemies (vv. 13–14); he waits for the Lord to act in his behalf (vv. 15–16). See 1Sa 25:32–39; 2Sa 16:10, 12. (CSB)

38:13-14 *deaf...mute* – Hearing and answering false charges is futile when faced with prearranged accusation and damning false witness (cf Is 53:7; Mt 26:57–68). (TLSB)

38:15 *for you O Lord, do I wait* – Like a deaf-mute, David relies on God to answer his accusers (cf 1Sm 25:32–39). (TLSB)

38:16 *when my foot slips* – When he experiences a personal blow to health or circumstance—here referring to his illness (see 66:9; 94:18; 121:3). (CSB)

38:17–20 As health declines, the vigor of his many enemies increases. (CSB)

38:17 *ready to fall* – Death seems near. (CSB)

38:18 *I confess my iniquity* – It is the nature of sin to fill the sinner with guilty fears, but by confessing his sin he gives God the most important reason to bring the chastening to an end. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

38:19–20 He has sinned against the Lord, but he is innocent of any wrong against those attacking him. (CSB)

38:19 Psalmist confessed his sin (v 18) but also his dismay that people he had not wronged were attacking him. Despite their blatant wickedness, his foes seem to go unpunished. Augustine: “[My enemies] are well off: they rejoice in worldly prosperity; while I am suffering, and ‘roaring with the groaning of my heart.’ ... This is their life; this life they praise; this they set their hearts upon: this they hold fast to their own ruin” (NPNF 1 8:110). (TLSB)

38:20 *good* – Morally good (see 34:14). (CSB)

They oppose him because he pursues good. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

38:21–22 In conclusion, a renewed appeal. (CSB)

38:21 *do not forsake me* – Hbr ‘*azab*, “abandon.” One of the psalmist’s greatest fears. The prophets accused Israel of forsaking God. (TLSB)

It is a plea for God to make his presence known by attending to his needs. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

Matthew 28:20, “...*And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.*”

Hebrews 4:14-16, “¹⁴ *Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.* ¹⁵ *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin.* ¹⁶ *Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*”

38:22 *O Lord my salvation* – Beautiful pronouncement that deliverance comes only through almighty God. (TLSB)

Ps 38 The Lord chastises His children in order to turn them from temptation and sin and to keep them safe and faithful to Him. Sin that is not confessed becomes a burden on our bodies and souls and causes great despair. The Law as a guide accuses us and shows us our sin (cf Rm 3:20; 7:7). Here we see that God’s divine will is ultimately for our good as believers. “O Lord, my salvation!” (v 22) is the beautiful confession that through the healing balm of the Lord’s mercy, there is deliverance and Absolution. • O Lord God Almighty, we are in Your hands. You pronounce us sinners, and we accept the truth of Your Word. May we be quick to confess our sin. Thank You for leading us to this confession through Your Law and promises. Keep us alive, O blessed and faithful Redeemer, for in You alone do we trust. Amen. (TLSB)