

# Psalm 38

A psalm. David's. To bring to remembrance.

- (1) Yahweh, don't rebuke me in your wrath, and don't  
chasten me in your fury,
- (2) for your arrows have sunk into me, and your hand has  
sunk down upon me.
- (3) There is no sound place in my flesh  
because of your rage;  
there is no wholeness in my bones  
because of my sin.
- (4) For my iniquities have gone over my head,  
like a heavy burden their weight is more than I can handle.
- (5) My wounds reek, they ooze,  
because of my folly.
- (6) I am terribly bent down, laid out;  
all day long I go around mourning,
- (7) for my sides are filled with burning,  
and there is no sound place in my flesh.
- (8) I've become numb and I've been terribly crushed;  
I roar because of the groaning of my heart.
- (9) Lord, all my desire is before you,  
and my sighing has not been hidden from you.

- (10) My heart hammers, my strength forsakes me,  
and the light of my eyes—even that has gone from me.
- (11) My friends and my companions stand off from my plague,  
and those near me stand a long ways away.
- (12) And those seeking my life set traps,  
and those seeking to harm me have spoken ruin  
—and all day long they keep mulling over deceptions.
- (13) But I am like a deaf fellow—I don't hear,  
and (I'm) like a dumb person who doesn't open his mouth.
- (14) So I became like a man who doesn't hear  
and like one with no rebukes in his mouth.
- (15) Because for **you**, Yahweh, I have waited;  
**you** will answer, O Lord, my God.
- (16) For I said, 'Lest they rejoice about me'  
—when my foot slips they boast themselves against me.
- (17) Indeed, I am ready to fall  
and my pain is continually before me.
- (18) Yes, I declare my iniquity,  
I am distressed because of my sin.
- (19) And my enemies, how alive! They are strong,  
and those who hate me wrongly have multiplied
- (20) and pay back evil for good  
—they oppose me for pursuing good.
- (21) Don't forsake me, Yahweh;  
O my God, don't be far from me.
- (22) Hurry to help me,  
O Lord, my salvation.

# 1

## WHEN TROUBLE IS ‘COMPLICATED-ER’...

Some time ago, *World* magazine told of an Indiana teenager who lost control of her car, rammed into a hollow tree, and suffered broken legs. That was the simple part. Seems when she hit the tree she smashed the home of some honeybees, who apparently were moved to intense anger. The bees plagued the attempts of paramedics and firefighters to free the girl. So a paramedic and seven firefighters accompanied the girl to the hospital where they were all treated for scores of bee stings. Somehow it couldn't be a normal road accident—it had to be complicated by all these additional hazards.

Which is a bit like Psalm 38. It's sometimes dubbed a 'penitential' psalm because it features confession for sin, but there is far more than that in it. The heading says it is meant 'to bring to remembrance.' That may mean it was to be used in conjunction with a memorial sacrifice or it may simply mean it was meant to remind the psalmist

of the whole experience. The psalm falls into two major sections (vv. 1-14, vv. 15-22), which we consider in turn.

First, in verses 1-14, we meet with **an extensive description of a complex trouble**. As we stick our noses in the text, we find he is troubled over his *guilt* (vv. 1-4). He fears Yahweh's wrath and fury (v. 1), which, along with his sin, has had adverse physical effects (no 'sound place in my flesh,' 'no wholeness in my bones,' v. 3). He is overwhelmed and crushed by the weight of his iniquities. It's as if Yahweh's arrows have nailed him (v. 2a). Allen Ross notes that the psalm nowhere specifies what the sin is or sins are. We have no need to know that. But clearly conscious sin and chastening wrath are at the root of his trouble.

This sin-plus-chastisement seems to involve *disease* or illness of some sort (vv. 5-7). His wounds reek and ooze (v. 5), his sides burn (v. 7); again (see v. 3) he says there is 'no sound place in my flesh' (v. 7b). It seems like his guilt has brought about some severe physical and loathsome symptoms. Verse 8, which mentions his roaring, suggests the helpless *frustration* he feels in the midst of it all. The guilt on his conscience (vv. 1-4) and the ravages of illness or disease (vv. 5-7) have, not surprisingly, brought on *exhaustion* (v. 10); and his physical demise ensures his *isolation* (v. 11)—former friends and associates are not enamored to spend time with gross and loathsome cases (v. 5). All of which brings about extreme *peril* (v. 12), for it's clear that someone in his condition is nothing but vulnerable to schemes and attacks. It all seems to reduce him to a state of *indifference* (vv. 13-14); he might just as well play deaf and dumb to it all; apathy seems the name of the game. If you look carefully at these seven marks of

David's condition, maybe you can sense how multi-faceted a believer's conflicts and troubles can be. We prefer simple troubles if we must have them; but sometimes, as in Psalm 38, they are a twisted, complicated mess. Here is a spiritual, physical, psychological, social, hostile quagmire.

How should we react to this plot of text? Hopefully, by recognizing how very complex and complicated the troubles of God's people often are. We love to simplify, because then we can better control. But sometimes, the dilemmas of the saints are not like that at all.

During the eleven months Luther spent in Wartburg castle, after his 'kidnapping,' conditions in Wittenberg deteriorated. Under the preaching of Carlstadt and others, violence and mobs seemed the order of the day, which imposed a sort of Reformation-by-force. It was near thuggery—smashing altars, shrines, stained-glass windows, and insulting people who wanted to stay loyal to Roman Catholicism. So the town magistrates appealed to Luther to return. He did. And with his preaching brought calm. He insisted that their chaos was not gospel-produced reformation. Among other things he told them:

Give people time! It took me three years of constant study, reflection, and discussion to arrive where I am now. Can the ordinary man, who has no education in such matters, be expected to move the same distance in three months?<sup>1</sup>

He was simply saying that 'It's not as simple as you're making it; people have to process these things; they have to think them through, need to be patiently taught,

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1 N. R. Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 5 vols. (Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2004), 3:131.

have such matters explained.’ That’s the way it is with the troubles of the Lord’s people—they can be terribly complex and twisted and involved, and we must beware of whipping out some knee-jerk solution for them just because it sounds like good bumper-sticker theology.

That is one matter. Note again that I’ve called this section ‘an *extensive description* of a complex trouble.’ After all, he goes on for 14 verses. David goes into every nook and cranny of his difficulty, revealing his assumption that *God has the time* for all of this. What a marvelous God David has! Spurgeon once wrote, ‘We are in such a hurry with poor troubled spirits that we hasten them on to the end of the sentence, and try to make them skip the weary details.’ He told of a fellow gospel minister who called on one of his poor people, a lady who told him how much she’d enjoyed his call. He had scarcely said a word to her and yet she had told him he had done her much good. So, candid fellow that he was, he asked her how it could be—how could he have done her good when he’d hardly said a word? Her response: ‘Ah, sir, you have listened so kindly: you have heard all I had to say, and there are very few who will do that.’<sup>2</sup> That is the God David has—a God who is willing to hear all ‘the dreary details.’

But, of course, David knows Yahweh already knows all these details. That’s clear in that little verse hidden away in the middle of all this, verse 9:

Lord, all my desire is before you,  
and my sighing has not been hidden from you.

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2 L. A. Banks, ed., *Spurgeon’s Illustrative Anecdotes* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1906), pp. 196-97.

He knows the Lord is completely aware of what he wants. As Kidner implies, the text is akin to Matthew 6:8, ‘For your Father knows what you need before you ask him.’ There is such a sense of release in that. Yet it doesn’t keep us from asking. In the Matthew context, the verse is not a deterrent but a stimulus to prayer. As Alexander Maclaren said, ‘The devout soul does not argue “Thou knowest, and I need not speak,” but “Thou knowest, therefore I tell thee.”’<sup>3</sup> Or, simply: God knows, I tell.

This compulsion drives the child of God. In 1894, Elisha Hoffman was pastoring a Presbyterian church in Vassar, Michigan. He visited an elderly lady who was facing severe difficulties. She shared her problems with Hoffman, who in turn tried to comfort her, pointing her to particular biblical texts. He urged her to pray and tell her problems to Jesus. Somehow that suggestion seemed to stick—she smiled and said, ‘Yes, I must tell Jesus.’

As Hoffman was on his way home her words kept repeating themselves, ‘I must tell Jesus.’ Other lines fell into place along with a singable tune.<sup>4</sup> And so we have ...

I must tell Jesus all of my trials;  
I cannot bear my burdens alone;  
In my distress he kindly will help me;  
He ever loves and cares for his own.

I must tell Jesus! I must tell Jesus!  
I cannot bear my burdens alone;  
I must tell Jesus! I must tell Jesus!  
Jesus can help me, Jesus alone.

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3 Alexander Maclaren, *The Psalms*, 3 vols. (reprint ed., Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, 1981), 1:381.

4 William J. Reynolds, *Songs of Glory* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), p. 123.

Next, in verses 15-22, we find a **patient confidence for an urgent need**. One can translate the first particle in verse 15 various ways: ‘But,’ ‘Indeed,’ or ‘Because.’ I’ve chosen the last. His ‘because’ explains why he has been so ‘deaf’ and ‘dumb’ (vv. 13-14), why he has taken no initiative to break free from his twisted circumstances, namely, *because* he is waiting for Yahweh to intervene.<sup>5</sup>

Notice the ‘wrapping’ around this section: in verse 15, David uses three terms for God, ‘Yahweh,’ ‘Lord’ (Adonai), and ‘my God.’ Then he uses the same three terms at the close in verses 21-22. At the first he says, ‘I have *waited*’ (v. 15), but at the end he pleads, ‘Hurry’ (v. 22). In between he includes four—what we might call—semi-arguments that indicate why he is confident that Yahweh will ‘answer’ him (v. 15b).

David begins in verse 16 by suggesting that Yahweh must answer him for otherwise *my enemies would rejoice*. In verse 17, he implies Yahweh must intervene because *my collapse is near*. Verse 18 is not so much an argument as a consideration: *my guilt is confessed*, that is, there is no wrong that I am hiding or covering up. Then there is the matter of the sheer injustice of his affliction: *my attackers are in the wrong* (vv. 19-20). All this is a normal pattern for Psalm-praying: marshalling reasons for God to put things right.

But perhaps the most cogent reason for confidence may seem an indirect one. Remember the three ways David addressed the Lord in verses 15 and 21-22. One of those terms was ‘my God’ (vv. 15, 21). We might ponder

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5 See Alec Motyer, *Psalms by the Day* (Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2016), p. 101.



the importance of that. Let's come at the matter from the back door.

Major Thomas Jackson (later General 'Stonewall' Jackson) in about 1853 realized that he had fallen in love with Eleanor (Ellie) Junkin, a real 'catch,' since she was both deeply religious and terribly fun-loving. Ellie had an older sister, Margaret (Maggie), and they were inseparable friends as well. They dressed alike, shared the same room, took walks together, rode horses together, shared their most intimate secrets. Maggie was not charmed over Jackson's matrimonial intentions toward her sister. It really became a bit of a crisis but sufficient peace ensued so that Jackson and Ellie were married. But Maggie went along with them on their honeymoon!<sup>6</sup> Before you condemn Maggie, realize that she may have had her defense: Why, she's *my sister* and we're closer than two crows on a piece of roadkill!

Now when David calls Yahweh 'my God,' does it not imply the same sort of inseparable relation? If Yahweh is his God, will He not be to him and for him all that God ought to be—even in the most contorted and grotesque of circumstances? Isn't there something of a solid assurance simply in David being able to say 'my God' here? I recall once reading Alexander Maclaren's exposition of 1 Samuel 30. That's the passage at the end of David's scrapes and escapes, the sour capstone of all his multiplied and ongoing troubles from 1 Samuel 18 on. David and his men have just enjoyed the relief of not having to fight against their own people (1 Sam. 29), and, after a sixty-mile trek back to Ziklag, they find the town

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6 S. C. Gwynne, *Rebel Yell* (New York: Scribner, 2014), pp. 142-45.

burned and wives and children taken captive. It seemed like the ultimate punch in the gut. David himself becomes the object of the blame game. Then the narrator writes: 'Then David strengthened himself in Yahweh his God' (1 Sam. 30:6). Maclaren picked up on that text and wrote that David could no longer say 'my house,' 'my city,' or 'my possessions,' but he could still say 'my God.' Isn't that always the believer's firmest assurance?