

PSALM 38

This is one of the penitential psalms; it is full of grief and complaint from the beginning to the end. David's sins and his afflictions are the cause of his grief and the matter of his complaints. It should seem he was now sick and in pain, which reminded him of his sins and helped to humble him for them; he was, at the same time, deserted by his friends and persecuted by his enemies; so that the psalm is calculated for the depth of distress and a complication of calamities. He complains,

I. Of God's displeasure, and of his own sin which provoked God against him (v. 1-5).

II. Of his bodily sickness (v. 6-10).

III. Of the unkindness of his friends (v. 11).

IV. Of the injuries which his enemies did him, pleading his good conduct towards them, yet confessing his sins against God (v. 12-20). Lastly, he concludes the psalm with earnest prayers to God for his gracious presence and help (v. 21, 22). In singing this psalm we ought to be much affected with the malignity of sin; and, if we have not such troubles as are here described, we know not how soon we may have, and therefore must sing of them by way of preparation and we know that others have them, and therefore we must sing of the by way of sympathy.

~~XXXI~~ PSALM 38:1-11

SORROWFUL COMPLAINTS

A psalm of David to bring to remembrance.

The title of this psalm is very observable; it is a psalm *to bring to remembrance*; the 70th psalm, which was likewise penned in a day of affliction, is so entitled. It is designed,

1. To bring to his own remembrance. We will suppose it penned when he was sick and in pain, and then it teaches us that times of sickness are times to bring to remembrance, to bring the sin to remembrance, for which God

contended with us, to awaken our consciences to deal faithfully and plainly with us, and set our sins in order before us, for our humiliation. *In a day of adversity consider.* Or we may suppose it penned after his recovery, but designed as a record of the convictions he was under and the workings of his heart when he was in affliction, that upon every review of this psalm he might call to mind the good impressions then made upon him and make a fresh improvement of them. To the same purport was the writing of Hezekiah when he had been sick.

2. To put others in mind of the same things which he was himself mindful of, and to teach them what to think and what to say when they are sick and in affliction; let them think as he did, and speak as he did.

I. He deprecates the wrath of God and his displeasure in his affliction (v. 1): *O Lord! rebuke me not in thy wrath.* With this same petition he began another prayer for the visitation of the sick, ⁽³⁰⁶⁾ Psalm 6:1. This was most upon his heart, and should be most upon ours when we are in affliction, that, however God rebukes and chastens us, it may not be in wrath and displeasure, for that will be wormwood and gall in the affliction and misery. Those that would escape the wrath of God must pray against that more than any outward affliction, and be content to bear any outward affliction while it comes from, and consists with, the love of God.

II. He bitterly laments the impressions of God's displeasure upon his soul (v. 2): *Thy arrows stick fast in me.* Let Job's complaint (⁽³⁰⁷⁾ Job 7:4) expound this of David. By the arrows of the Almighty he means the terrors of God, which did set themselves in array against him. He was under a very melancholy frightful apprehension of the wrath of God against him for his sins, and thought he could look for nothing but judgment and fiery indignation to devour him. God's arrows, as they are sure to hit the mark, so they are sure to stick where they hit, to stick fast, till he is pleased to draw them out and to bind up with his comforts the wound he has made with his terrors. This will be the everlasting misery of the damned — the arrows of God's wrath will stick fast in them and the wound will be incurable. *“Thy hand, thy heavy hand, presses me sore, and I am ready to sink under it; it not only lies hard upon me, but it lies long; and who knows the power of God's anger, the weight of his hand?”* Sometimes God shot his arrows, and stretched forth his hand, for David (⁽³⁰⁸⁾ Psalm 18:14), but now against him; so uncertain is the continuance of divine comforts, where yet the continuance of divine grace is assured. He complains of

God's wrath as that which inflicted the bodily distemper he was under (v. 3): *There is no soundness in my flesh because of thy anger.* The bitterness of it, infused in his mind, affected his body; but that was not the worst: it caused the disquietude of his heart, by reason of which he forgot the courage of a soldier, the dignity of a prince, and all the cheerfulness of the sweet psalmist of Israel, and roared terribly, v. 8. Nothing will disquiet the heart of a good man so much as the sense of God's anger, which shows what a fearful thing it is to fall into his hands. The way to keep the heart quiet is to keep ourselves in the love of God and to do nothing to offend him.

III. He acknowledges his sin to be the procuring provoking cause of all his troubles, and groans more under the load of guilt than any other load, v. 3. He complains that his flesh had no soundness, his bones had no rest, so great an agitation he was in. “It is *because of thy anger*; that kindles the fire which burns so fiercely;” but, in the next words, he justifies God herein, and takes all the blame upon himself: “It is *because of my sin*. I have deserved it, and so have brought it upon myself. My own iniquities do correct me.” If our trouble be the fruit of God's anger, we may thank ourselves; it is our sin that is the cause of it. Are we restless? It is sin that makes us so. If there were not sin in our souls, there would be no pain in our bones, no illness in our bodies. It is sin therefore that this good man complains most of,

1. As a burden, a heavy burden (v. 4): “*My iniquities have gone over my head*, as proud waters over a man that is sinking and drowning, or as a heavy burden upon my head, pressing me down more than I am able to bear or to bear up under.” Note, Sin is a burden. The power of sin dwelling in us is a weight, ^{<301>}Hebrews 12:1. All are clogged with it; it keeps men from soaring upward and pressing forward. All the saints are complaining of it as a body of death they are loaded with, ^{<302>}Romans 7:24. The guilt of sin committed by us is a burden, a heavy burden; it is a burden to God (he is pressed under it, ^{<303>}Amos 2:13), a burden to the whole creation, which groans under it, ^{<304>}Romans 8:21, 22. It will, first or last, be a burden to the sinner himself, either a burden of repentance when he is pricked to the heart for it, labours, and is heavy-laden, under it, or a burden of ruin when it sinks him to the lowest hell and will for ever detain him there; it will be a talent of lead upon him, ^{<305>}Zechariah 5:8. Sinners are said to bear their iniquity. Threatenings are burdens.

2. As wounds, dangerous wounds (v. 5): “*My wounds stink and are corrupt* (as wounds in the body rankle, and fester, and grow foul, for want of being dressed and looked after), and it is through my own *foolishness*.” Sins are wounds (¹⁰⁰²³Genesis 4:23), painful mortal wounds. Our wounds by sin are often in a bad condition, no care taken of them, no application made to them, and it is owing to the sinner's foolishness in not confessing sin, ¹⁰⁰²³Psalm 32:3, 4. A slight sore, neglected, may prove of fatal consequence, and so may a slight sin slighted and left unrepented of.

IV. He bemoans himself because of his afflictions, and gives ease to his grief by giving vent to it and pouring out his complaint before the Lord.

1. He was troubled in mind, his conscience was pained, and he had no rest in his own spirit; and a wounded spirit who can bear? He was *troubled*, or distorted, *bowed down greatly*, and went *mourning all the day long*, v. 6. He was always pensive and melancholy, which made him a burden and terror to himself. His spirit was feeble and sorely broken, and his heart disquieted, v. 8. Herein David, in his sufferings, was a type of Christ, who, being in his agony, cried out, *My soul is exceedingly sorrowful*. This is a sorer affliction than any other in this world; whatever God is pleased to lay upon us, we have no reason to complain as long as he preserves to us the use of our reason and the peace of our consciences.

2. He was sick and weak in body; his loins were filled with a loathsome disease, some swelling, or ulcer, or inflammation (some think a plague-sore, such as Hezekiah's boil), and there was *no soundness in his flesh*, but, like Job, he was all over distempered. See

(1.) What vile bodies these are which we carry about with us, what grievous diseases they are liable to, and what an offence and grievance they may soon be made by some diseases to the souls that animate them, as they always are a cloud and cog.

(2.) That the bodies both of the greatest and of the best of men have in them the same seeds of diseases that the bodies of others have, and are liable to the same disasters. David himself, though so great a prince and so great a saint, was not exempt from the most grievous diseases: there was no soundness even in his flesh. Probably this was after his sin in the matter of Uriah, and thus did he smart in his flesh for his fleshly lusts. When, at any time, we are distempered in our bodies, we ought to remember how God has been dishonoured in and by our bodies. He was *feeble and sorely*

broken, v. 8. His *heart panted*, and was in a continual palpitation, v. 10. His *strength* and limbs *failed* him. As for *the light of his eyes*, that *had gone from him*, either with much weeping or by a defluxion of rheum upon them, or perhaps through the lowness of his spirits and the frequent returns of fainting. Note, Sickness will tame the strongest body and the stoutest spirit. David was famed for his courage and great exploits; and yet, when God contended with him by bodily sickness and the impressions of his wrath upon his mind, his hair is cut, his heart fails him, and he becomes weak as water. Therefore let not the strong man glory in his strength, nor any man set grief at defiance, however it may be thought at a distance.

3. His friends were unkind to him (v. 11): *My lovers* (such as had been merry with him in the day of his mirth) now *stand aloof from my sore*; they would not sympathize with him in his griefs, nor so much as come within hearing of his complaints, but, like the priest and Levite (~~218~~ Luke 10:31), *passed on the other side*. Even *his kinsmen*, that were bound to him by blood and alliance, *stood afar off*. See what little reason we have to trust in man or to wonder if we disappointed in our expectations of kindness from men. Adversity tries friendship, and separates between the precious and the vile. It is our wisdom to make sure a friend in heaven, who will not stand aloof from our sore and from whose love no tribulation nor distress shall be able to separate us. David, in his troubles, was a type of Christ in his agony, Christ, on his cross, feeble and sorely broken, and then deserted by his friends and kinsmen, who beheld afar off.

V. In the midst of his complaints, he comforts himself with the cognizance God graciously took both of his griefs and of his prayers (v. 9): “*Lord, all my desire is before thee*. Thou knowest what I want and what I would have: *My groaning is not hidden from thee*. Thou knowest the burdens I groan under and the blessings I groan after.” The *groanings which cannot be uttered* are not hidden from him that *searches the heart and knows what is the mind of the Spirit*, ~~488~~ Romans 8:26, 27.

In singing this, and praying it over, whatever burden lies upon our spirits, we would by faith cast it upon God, and all our care concerning it, and then be easy.

PSALM 38:12-22

SORROWFUL COMPLAINTS

In these verses,

I. David complains of the power and malice of his enemies, who, it should seem, not only took occasion from the weakness of his body and the trouble of his mind to insult over him, but took advantage thence to do him a mischief. He has a great deal to say against them, which he humbly offers as a reason why God should appear for him, as ^{<1259>}Psalm 25:19, *Consider my enemies.*

1. “They are very spiteful and cruel: *They seek my hurt*; nay, they *seek after my life*,” v. 12. That life which was so precious in the sight of the Lord and all good men was aimed at, as if it had been forfeited, or a public nuisance. Such is the enmity of the serpent's seed against the seed of the woman; it would wound the head, though it can but reach the heel. It is the blood of the saints that is thirsted after.

2. “They are very subtle and politic. They *lay snares*, they *imagine deceits*, and herein they are restless and unwearied: they do it *all the day long*. They speak mischievous things one to another; every one has something or other to propose that may be a mischief to me.” Mischief, covered and carried on by deceit, may well be called a *snare*.

3. “They are very insolent and abusive: *When my foot slips*, when I fall into any trouble, or when I make any mistake, misplace a word, or take a false step, they magnify themselves against me; they are pleased with it, and promise themselves that it will ruin my interest, and that if I slip I shall certainly fall and be undone.”

4. “They are not only unjust, but very ungrateful: They *hate me wrongfully*, v. 19. I never did them any ill turn, nor so much as bore them any ill-will, nor ever gave them any provocation; nay, *they render evil for good*, v. 20. Many a kindness I have done them, for which I might have expected a return of kindness; but *for my love they are my adversaries*,” ^{<1261>}Psalm 109:4. Such a rooted enmity there is in the hearts of wicked men to goodness for its own sake that they hate it, even when they themselves have the benefit of it; they hate prayer even in those that pray for them,

and hate peace even in those that would be at peace with them. Very ill-natured indeed those are whom no courtesy will oblige, but who are rather exasperated by it.

5. “They are very impious and devilish: *They are my adversaries merely because I follow the thing that good is.*” They hated him, not only for his kindness to them, but for his devotion and obedience to God; they hated him because they hated God and all that bear his image. If we suffer ill for doing well, we must not think it strange; from the beginning it was so (Cain slew Abel, because his works were righteous); nor must we think it hard, because it will not be always so; for so much the greater will our reward be.

6. “They are many and mighty: *They are lively; they are strong; they are multiplied, v. 19. Lord, how are those increased that trouble me?*”

~~408~~ Psalm 3:1. Holy David was weak and faint; his heart panted, and his strength failed; he was melancholy and of a sorrowful spirit, and persecuted by his friends; but at the same time his wicked enemies were strong and lively, and their number increased. Let us not therefore pretend to judge of men's characters by their outward condition; none knows love or hatred by all that is before him. It should seem that David in this, as in other complaints he makes of his enemies, has an eye to Christ, whose persecutors were such as are here described, perfectly lost to all honour and virtue. None hate Christianity but such as have first divested themselves of the first principles of humanity and broken through its most sacred bonds.

II. He reflects, with comfort, upon his own peaceable and pious behaviour under all the injuries and indignities that were done him. It is then only that our enemies do us a real mischief when they provoke us to sin (~~408~~ Nehemiah 6:13), when they prevail to put us out of the possession of our own souls, and drive us from God and our duty. If by divine grace we are enabled to prevent this mischief, we quench their fiery darts, and are saved from harm. If still we hold fast our integrity and our peace, who can hurt us? This David did here.

1. He kept his temper, and was not ruffled nor discomposed by any of the slights that were put upon him or the mischievous things that were said or done against him (v. 13, 14): “*I, as a deaf man, heard not; I took no notice of the affronts put upon me, did not resent them, nor was put into*

disorder by them, much less did I meditate revenge, or study to return the injury.” Note, The less notice we take of the unkindness and injuries that are done us the more we consult the quiet of our own minds. Being deaf, he was dumb, as a man *in whose mouth there are no reproofs*; he was as silent as if he had nothing to say for himself, for fear of putting himself into a heat and incensing his enemies yet more against him; he would not only not recriminate upon them, but not so much as vindicate himself, lest his necessary defence should be construed his offence. Though they sought after his life, and his silence might be taken for a confession of his guilt, yet he was as a dumb man that opens not his mouth. Note, When our enemies are most clamorous it is generally our prudence to be silent, or to say little, lest we make bad worse. David could not hope by his mildness to win upon his enemies, nor by his soft answers to turn away their wrath; for they were men of such base spirits that they rendered him evil for good; and yet he conducted himself thus meekly towards them, that he might prevent his own sin and might have the comfort of it in the reflection. Herein David was a type of Christ, who was as a sheep dumb before the shearer, and, when he was reviled, reviled not again; and both are examples to us not to render railing for railing.

2. He kept close to his God by faith and prayer, and so both supported himself under these injuries and silenced his own resentments of them.

(1.) He trusted in God (v. 15): *“I was as a man that opens not his mouth, for in thee, O Lord! do I hope. I depend upon thee to plead my cause and clear my innocency, and, some way or other, to put my enemies to silence and shame.”* His lovers and friends, that should have owned him, and stood by him, and appeared as witnesses for him, withdrew from him, v. 10. but God is a friend that will never fail us if we hope in him. *“I was as a man that heareth not, for thou wilt hear. Why need I hear, and God hear too?”* *He careth for you* (~~OUR~~ 1 Peter 5:7), and why need you care and God care too? *“Thou wilt answer”* (so some) *“and therefore I will say nothing.”* Note, It is a good reason why we should bear reproach and calumny with silence and patience, because God is a witness to all the wrong that is done us, and, in due time, will be a witness for us and against those that do us wrong; therefore let us be silent, because, if we be, then we may expect that God will appear for us, for this is an evidence that we trust in him; but, if we undertake to manage for ourselves, we take God's work out of his hands and forfeit the benefit of his appearing for us. Our Lord Jesus, when he suffered, threatened not, because he *committed*

himself to him that judges righteously (⁴⁰²³1 Peter 2:23); and we shall lose nothing, at last, by doing so. *Thou shalt answer, Lord, for me.*

(2.) He called upon God (v. 16): *For I said, Hear me* (that is supplied); *“I said so”* (as v. 15); *“in thee do I hope, for thou wilt hear, lest they should rejoice over me. I comforted myself with that when I was apprehensive that they would overwhelm me.”* It is a great support to us, when men are false and unkind, that we have a God to go to whom we may be free with and who will be faithful to us.

III. He here bewails his own follies and infirmities.

1. He was very sensible of the present workings of corruption in him, and that he was now ready to repine at the providence of God and to be put into a passion by the injuries men did him: *I am ready to halt*, v. 17. This will best be explained by a reflection like this which the psalmist made upon himself in a similar case (^{497D}Psalm 73:2): *My feet were almost gone, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.* So here: *I was ready to halt, ready to say, I have cleansed my hands in vain.* His sorrow was continual: *All the day long have I been plagued.* (^{497B3}Psalm 73:13, 14), and it was continually before him; he could not forbear poring upon it, and that made him almost ready to halt between religion and irreligion. The fear of this drove him to his God: *“In thee do I hope, not only that thou wilt plead my cause, but that thou wilt prevent my falling into sin.”* Good men, by setting their sorrow continually before them, have been ready to halt, who, by setting God always before them, have kept their standing.

2. He remembered against himself his former transgressions, acknowledging that by them he had brought these troubles upon himself and forfeited the divine protection. Though before men he could justify himself, before God he will judge and condemn himself (v. 18): *“I will declare my iniquity, and not cover it; I will be sorry for my sin, and not make a light matter of it;”* and this helped to make him silent under the rebukes of Providence and the reproaches of men. Note, If we be truly penitent for sin, that will make us patient under affliction, and particularly under unjust censures. Two things are required in repentance: —

(1.) Confession of sin: *“I will declare my iniquity; I will not only in general own myself a sinner, but I will make a particular acknowledgment of what I have done amiss.”* We must declare our sins before God freely

and fully, and with their aggravating circumstances, that we may give glory to God and take shame to ourselves.

(2.) Contrition for sin: *I will be sorry for it.* Sin will have sorrow; every true penitent grieves for the dishonour he has done to God and the wrong he has done to himself. “I will be in care or fear about my sin” (so some), “in fear lest it ruin me and in care to get it pardoned.”

IV. He concludes with very earnest prayers to God for his gracious presence with him and seasonable powerful succour in his distress (v. 21, 11): “*Forsake me not, O Lord!* though my friends forsake me, and though I deserve to be forsaken by thee. Be not far from me, as my unbelieving heart is ready to fear thou art.” Nothing goes nearer to the heart of a good man in affliction than to be under the apprehension of God's deserting him in wrath; nor does any thing therefore come more feelingly from his heart than this prayer: “*Lord, be not thou far from me; make haste for my help;* for I am ready to perish, and in danger of being lost if relief do not come quickly.” God gives us leave, not only to call upon him when we are in trouble, but to hasten him. He pleads, “Thou art *my God*, whom I serve, and on whom I depend to bear me out; and *my salvation*, who alone art able to save me, who hast engaged thyself by promise to save me, and from whom alone I expect salvation.” Is any afflicted? let him thus pray, let him thus plead, let him thus hope, in singing this psalm.