

## Help Me, O LORD!

Psalm 38

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We are three Sundays from Easter. We will cover Psalm 40 on Easter Sunday. As we move toward Easter, Psalm 38 and Psalm 39 help us prepare for Christ's crucifixion and resurrection from the dead, which is our rescue from sin, death, and God's wrath.

Before we get into Psalm 38, I want to build on something Pastor Dean said last Sunday about the connections between these last few Psalms. I think that, as we bring Book 1 to a close, a high-level view of these last few Psalms will give us a glide path for landing the Book 1 series. If you remember from last Sunday, Psalm 36 is a picture of coming to faith in Jesus because it explains the gospel. Psalm 37 is living out your faith. This morning, we will look at Psalm 38 and how to respond when we stumble in our faith. Psalm 39 is about persevering in your faith after a failure. Psalm 40 is proclaiming a resurrected faith. Finally, Psalm 41, the Sunday after Easter, is about dying in faith.

All the Psalms we have worked through in this series are heavy. However, some of these Psalms are heavier than others. The heavier Psalms are what we call the penitential Psalms. They are especially heavy because they address our lives as sinners. This is what we are covering today. Psalm 38 is a penitential Psalm about the devastating effects of sin on the sinner's life.

When we fall or stumble into sin, that sin which can so easily ensnares us rarely announces itself as something destructive. It often enters quietly—disguised as relief, control, or pleasure. Let's take drinking alcohol as an example. Now, this is just an example; I am not saying drinking is a sin, but I want to show you it's devastating effects when it becomes a sin. Most sins work their devastating effects in our lives in similar patterns.

So, when it comes to drinking, a person often begins drinking just to "*relax*" after long days. At first, it seems harmless, even helpful. But over time, what was once a choice becomes a dependency. His body begins to feel it first: Restless nights, shaking hands in the morning, a constant fatigue that no amount of sleep can fix. His health deteriorates, but he keeps going, convinced he can manage it.

Emotionally, the fracture runs deeper. Relationships that once brought joy now feel strained. Conversations with his family grow shorter, defensive, and filled with irritation. Trust erodes slowly—missed commitments, broken promises, small lies that pile up into a wall between him and the people who love him most. Shame begins to settle in, but instead of leading him to honesty, it drives him further into isolation. He feels trapped between the person he once was and the person he's becoming.

Any sin that takes hold of our lives works like a hidden disease. It doesn't just affect one area of life; it spreads like cancer. Sin leaks into every segment of our lives. The body weakens under its weight, while the heart grows heavier with guilt, anxiety, and loneliness. What once seemed like freedom reveals itself as bondage. The man who thought he was in control now finds himself controlled, physically drained, emotionally fragmented, and spiritually numb.

In the end, sin doesn't merely bend a life; it breaks it. It distorts desires, damages the body, and fractures the soul, leaving behind a person who barely recognizes themselves. Someone once said, "*Sin takes you further than you want to go, costs you more than you want to pay, and makes you stay longer than you want to stay.*" He was right.

David wrote Psalm 38 out of this kind of anguish in his heart. Sin had devastated his life. Listen, it is one thing to endure pain, but it is quite another to endure pain that you know has come from your own sin.

Friends, David was completely overwhelmed with life when he wrote:

*I am utterly bowed down and prostrate;*

*all the day I go about mourning.*

However, his pain is doubled by the knowledge that this pain is, as v. 3 says, “*because of my sin.*” And, as v. 5 says, “*because of my foolishness.*” As a result, he is at the end of himself. He was enduring physical distress, emotional pain, and relational dysfunction.

Every child of God knows something of this pain. We know that when various trials in life arise from our own foolishness, the pain is doubled. We are not innocent victims of someone else’s foolishness. It is our own foolishness that wrecked our lives.

How do we respond when we have wrecked our lives with our own sin? Does God have an answer for this? Is this an anguish that goes beyond the resources of the grace of God? Can true believers sin their way out of the mercy of God?

May it never be. The apostle Paul insists with reassuring clarity that when our sin accumulates, His grace comes in even stronger. God’s answer for those who squander His grace through foolishness is to give them more grace. Friends, in Jesus, there is an unending fountain of inexhaustible grace that has been secured. God treats believers not according to what they deserve but according to Christ’s merit.<sup>1</sup>

The shadow of the cross hangs darkly over Psalm 38. It is very timely that we are in this Psalm so close to Easter.

Here’s the main point of the sermon: *Sin can crush our lives, but through Jesus’ substitutionary death on the cross, God saves those who repent and trust in Him.*

We are going to examine Psalm 38 through two lenses. The first lens is to see how sin devastated King David’s life and see how it applies to us. The second lens is seeing the devastating effects of our sin imputed to Jesus as He goes to the cross and dies for our sins. What I mean by the second lens is that we get a small window into Jesus’ life as He bears our sins. We hear His physical pain, emotional pain, and relational pain as He talks about the devastating effects of sin on Himself as if He had literally committed those sins.

Before we go any further, I need to make sure you understand what *imputation* means. In Scripture, imputation is most clearly seen in connection with Adam and humanity. When Adam sinned, his guilt was imputed to all people. The Apostle Paul wrote in Romans 5:18–19,

*Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. <sup>19</sup> For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous.*

This doesn’t mean every person committed the exact same sin as Adam did, but that his disobedience is counted as our disobedience. This is because he acted as the representative head of the human race. As a result, all are born under the guilt and consequence of sin.

Imputation also applies on a personal level. Our own sins are rightly counted against us—we are truly guilty before God for what we think, say, and do in rebellion against Him.

However, the doctrine of imputation becomes profoundly hopeful in the gospel. At the cross, our sins were imputed to Jesus Christ. Again, the Apostle Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:21,

*For our sake, he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

Though He was sinless, God counted our guilt as Jesus’ guilt. He bore the full penalty for sin in our place. In exchange, Christ’s righteousness is imputed to those who repent of their sins and place their faith in Him as their Lord and Savior. Just as our sin was credited to Him, His perfect obedience is credited to us by faith. This is often called the “*great exchange.*” What we are going to primarily see in Psalm 38 is the devastating impact of the Christian’s sin as it was imputed to Jesus on the cross.

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<sup>1</sup> Dane C. Ortlund, *In The LORD I Take Refuge: 150 Daily Devotions thlitterallyrough the Pslams*, 108.

Listen to me: We very often talk about how the imputation of Christ's righteousness in the believer's life is such a wonderful thing. We often talk about how amazing it is that Christ lived a perfect life and then gave us or imputed to us His perfect life. It is amazing! However, we rarely talk about the devastating effects of the imputation of our sin on His life. Well, we talk about Him going to the cross and dying for our sins, but we rarely break down the pain He experienced physically and psychologically. Psalm 38 puts the imputation of our sin into Jesus on the cross under a microscope so we can see the painful details as He owned our sins as if He had committed them.

Psalm 38 breaks down into four sections. Three sections describe the weight of sin upon the sinner/Jesus. The final section is in vv. 21-22 and describes the sinner's salvation. Each new section begins with the covenant name of God, "O LORD."

#### I. The physical and emotional misery of the sinner (vv. 1-8)

David begins his prayer with a desperate plea:

*O LORD, rebuke me not in your anger, nor discipline me in your wrath.*

We don't know what David's particular sin is in this Psalm. Whatever his sin was, he didn't deny that he deserved correction and discipline. So, instead of denying his sin or seeking to avoid discipline, he asks God to temper justice with mercy.

David continues in v. 2:

*For your arrows have sunk into me, and your hand has come down on me.*

He describes God's discipline as arrows piercing him and a heavy hand pressing down on him. In other words, he felt the weight of sin's consequences in his body.

What we need to keep in mind as we read Psalm 38 is that this is not the language of random suffering. David believed his suffering was connected to his sin, and this worried him. He didn't want God to discipline him in anger. He was already feeling the intense pain of that discipline.

Listen closely because I don't want you to misunderstand me. Sure, there are times when we sin, and the consequences of that sin correlate directly to our suffering. The LORD may forgive us, but the consequences of foolish sin remain. I can look back on my life and easily connect the dots of my sin to some kind of physical suffering that was the result. Perhaps you can too. However, that doesn't mean every sin gets punished with some sort of physical consequence.

Likewise, not every ache, pain, illness, or disease is a result of the LORD's discipline for our sin. Sometimes our physical suffering and illnesses are simply the result of living in a broken world, or they are, by God's design, meant to reveal His glory. There is much I can say about sin and suffering and how they are not always connected. However, this is not the point of Psalm 38.

In Psalm 38, King David recognizes that his sin is the reason for his suffering. Look at what he says in vv. 3-8 about his physical condition as a result of his sin:

*There is no soundness in my flesh because of your indignation; there is no health in my bones because of my sin. <sup>4</sup> For my iniquities have gone over my head;*

*like a heavy burden, they are too heavy for me.*

*<sup>5</sup> My wounds stink and fester because of my foolishness, <sup>6</sup> I am utterly bowed down and prostrate;*

*all the day I go about mourning. <sup>7</sup> For my sides are filled with burning, and there is no soundness in my flesh. <sup>8</sup> I am feeble and crushed;*

*I groan because of the tumult of my heart.*

David recognizes that this particular sin or sins have resulted in this particular sickness and pain. He can connect the dots of his sin to his suffering. We know this because David repeats the words “*because of*” three times in v. 3 and v. 5.

Puritan pastor and theologian John Owen said in his book *The Mortification of Sin*:

*Be killing sin, or sin will be killing you.*

David’s sin was killing him, and it will kill us unless we turn from it. I can remember a time in my life, long before the Lord called me into ministry, when I was stuck in a particular sin for a few years. I can clearly remember the Lord impressing on me that if I continued in this sin, it was going to kill me. Listen, I didn’t say the Lord was going to kill, but the sin, which I was committing, was going to result in its natural consequences if I continued in it. As John Owen said, *the sin was going to kill me*.

So, as we apply vv. 1-8, let’s remember the two lenses that will help us. The first lens is how vv. 1-8 apply directly to us. Listen, it might seem strange that God shoots arrows at His own children. Yet, that is what He does.

Hebrews teaches us that a loving Father disciplines His children, and the arrows of God are meant for our good. They are meant to lead us to repentance. It is through the kindness of God that we experience the discipline of God that leads us to repentance.

If you are like me, you are a slow learner, and the painful consequences of my sin led me to repentance. Have you ever had that experience? Man, I have and more than once.

Listen to me, sometimes the best thing God can do for us is to wound us deeply in this life so that He can give us real life in this world and eternal life in the world to come.

We need to understand that the arrows of God are not arrows shot at us in anger. They are gospel arrows that are meant to be shot into the heart of the sinner so that they turn from their sin and to Him for healing and forgiveness. Sometimes, the LORD heals us from the consequences of our sin, and sometimes He doesn’t. He is working out His plan in your life for His glory and your good.

Likewise, remember that not all sickness and suffering may be a result of your sin. There may be any number of good and glorious plans the LORD may be working out, as He weaves the dark thread of sickness and suffering into the tapestry of your life. Ultimately, you need to trust that God knows what He is doing and hold fast to Him.

Now, let’s apply these verses through the second lens. In Psalm 38, David’s words are prophetic and point us to Jesus’ experience. Friends, there was no reason for Jesus to experience the suffering described in vv. 1-8. He had no sin of His own for God to discipline or punish Him. Jesus could only pray this prayer because our sins were transferred to Him, and He experienced the weight of those sins and the wrath of God on Him for our sins.

What we see in these verses is the imputation of our sin to Jesus, and He cries out in agony because of our sin as He goes to the cross. He bore the pain of our sin as if He had committed those sins.

Friends, we rarely get this glimpse into the imputation of our sin to Jesus’ life. Psalm 22 is the other Psalm where we see it, but in Psalm 38, we get an intimate glimpse of Jesus Christ’s physical and emotional suffering as if He had committed our sins.

I want to go back and re-read vv. 1-8. As I read it, I want you to think of Jesus praying this prayer as He hung on the cross, paying for your sins. (re-read from the Bible or Service Guide)

Now, hang on to the depth of this thought because I will come back to this at the end. For now, let’s move on to our vv. 9-14 and our second point.

## II. The isolated misery of the sinner (vv. 9-14)

The second section of Psalm 38 reveals something many people experience when suffering due to their sin: loneliness. There is no one more lonely than a brokenhearted sinner who is suffering under the weight of their sin.

Listen to vv. 9-11:

*O Lord, all my longing is before you;  
my sighing is not hidden from you.  
<sup>10</sup> My heart throbs; my strength fails me,  
and the light of my eyes—it also has gone from me.  
<sup>11</sup> My friends and companions stand aloof from my plague,  
and my nearest kin stand far off.*

The good news is that David, while he feels lonely, is confident that God sees him. Even when friends fail us, and they will, God has not abandoned us. David longs for everything to be set right again. He longs for his health to be restored, well-being to be renewed, and for the discipline to end. Yet, he confesses that he is powerless to heal himself.

We just read v. 11, but we need to hear it again because it tells us of David's relational suffering:

*My friends and companions stand aloof from my plague,  
and my nearest kin stand far off.*

His friends who once stood near now stand far away. Why did they do that? Why did they distance themselves from him? Possibly, it was because they feared the suffering or the shame surrounding his sin. Perhaps they misunderstood his condition. The bottom line is that v. 11 often mirrors something deeply human: When we suffer because of our sin, community often disappears.

As we consider v. 11, let's be careful as a church not to fall into this trap. Let's not be a church that abandons our fellow believers as they struggle with sin and seek to repent of those sins.

As Christians, let's not leave a brother or sister alone when they are struggling. We may want to pull back because we don't know what to do or what to say. It may be that we are uncomfortable with what they are going through because of the consequences of their sin. We may worry about what people may think or say if we reach out to them. We don't need to be like Job's friends and try to explain why these things are happening to them as if we know the mind of God. All we need to do is be there for them.

Finally, vv. 12-14 describe how David's enemies plotted against him while he suffered. Listen to vv. 12-14, because in these verses we hear how David's experience points us to Jesus:

*Those who seek my life lay their snares;  
those who seek my hurt speak of ruin  
and meditate treachery all day long.  
<sup>13</sup> But I am like a deaf man; I do not hear,  
like a mute man who does not open his mouth.  
<sup>14</sup> I have become like a man who does not hear,  
and in whose mouth are no rebukes.*

When we apply vv. 9-14, through the second lens, we continue to see the effects of our sin on Jesus as they are being imputed to Him. His disciples fled, even Peter, who vowed he would stay with him. Luke tells us that as Jesus died, all of his friends and followers stood at a distance watching Him die. Jesus enemies, on the other hand, stood close to Him and gloated as they brought about His ruin.

So, what we need to see here is that we are both the friends who abandoned Him and the enemies who stood near and mocked Him by returning evil for His good. The Apostle Paul tells us in Ephesians 2 that we were enemies with God. It is only by the shed blood of Jesus that we are brought near to Him.

III. The anxious hope of the sinner (vv. 15-20)

As we consider vv. 15-20, I have put two words together that seem like they don't belong together: "anxious hope." I use these words because they seem to be the best way to describe the transition in the emotions and expectations of David's prayer.

*But for you, O LORD, do I wait;*

*it is you, O Lord my God, who will answer.*  
<sup>16</sup> *For I said, "Only let them not rejoice over me,  
 who boast against me when my foot slips!"*  
<sup>17</sup> *For I am ready to fall, and my pain is ever before me.*  
<sup>18</sup> *I confess my iniquity; I am sorry for my sin.*  
<sup>19</sup> *But my foes are vigorous, they are mighty,  
 and many are those who wrongfully hate me.*  
<sup>20</sup> *Those who render me evil for good  
 accuse me because I follow after good.*

You can hear David's anxious hope as he prays. Waiting is hard to do, isn't it? Waiting on God is one of the hardest tests of faith there is. We pray, and we wonder: *Does God know? Did He hear my prayer? Does He care about my little situation and suffering? Then it seems that nothing happens, and we begin to wonder if He will do anything.*

We hear David place his faith in God as he prays. He still feels his weakness and that he is on the edge of failure. He has confessed his sin, and yet his enemies still pursue him and do evil things to him, even though he does good to them. Yet, David's hope is growing stronger.

Even after David repented, his difficulties remained. He still had many enemies. They still persecuted him. They were powerful, and they repaid his kindness with evil. Friends, repentance does not immediately remove all consequences of sin. We may have been forgiven, and our relationship with God is restored, but the consequences remain. The challenge for us is to hold fast to God as our hope in Christ grows stronger.

Now, let's consider the second lens application: Jesus was rendered evil for the good He did for us. He took our sins upon Himself on the cross and didn't just confess them; He bore the evil of our sins in His body, as if He had committed those sins, and received the wrath of God we so justly deserved for our sin. While we were still sinners, Christ paid our debt of sin.

#### IV. The glorious rescue of the sinner (vv. 21-22)

In these final two verses, David's anxious hope has become the fullness of hope in God's glorious salvation.

*Do not forsake me, O LORD!  
 O my God, be not far from me!  
<sup>22</sup> Make haste to help me,  
 O Lord, my salvation!*

Let's close with a second lens application for these final two verses. Jesus was forsaken, so we would never be forsaken. He was alone, so we would never be alone. Since God poured His wrath on him, we know that God is for us.

Do you remember I told you to hold on to that thought about imputation at the beginning of the sermon? Well, here is where this is going – are you ready?

The other half of imputation, or the great exchange, is this. It means that when we come to Jesus, repent of our sins, and place our faith in Him, the righteousness He earned is imputed to us, and God sees us as if we had actually lived the perfect, sinless life Jesus lived.

Now, listen to me – this thought ought to blow our little theological minds in a million pieces. How in the world can God do that? Why would He do that? Well, it is not because we deserve it, because none of us deserve it. What we deserved was hell and the wrath of God, but God, in His great love and mercy, chose to love us, and because of what Jesus did on our behalf, He sees us as clean, righteous, pure, and holy. He adopts us as His very own sons or daughters. We are now part of God's family. We are children of the King because of what Jesus did in Psalm 38.

Let me close by making a final application of Psalm 38 through the two lenses.

Lens #1: The direct application of the text:

First, we must take sin seriously. Psalm 38 doesn't minimize sin or its consequences. Sometimes there is a direct correlation between our sin and our suffering. So, we must be killing sin, or it will be killing us. The gospel does not deny sin—it defeats it.

Second, bring your life that is broken by sin to God. King David teaches us that instead of denying our sin, covering it up, or pretending we are okay, we must run to God as fast as we can.

Many people will try to do what Adam and Eve did in the Garden after they sinned. They will try to hide from God out of shame. However, the gospel invites sinners to come honestly and be covered by His grace. God already knows the truth about our sin. What we need to do is confess our sin and have our relationship with God restored.

Third, we must trust God in seasons of discipline for our sin. Listen, God's discipline is painful but purposeful. He doesn't discipline us in anger but in grace and mercy for our good and His glory. It is the correction of a loving Father. Remember, the goal of discipline is repentance and restoration, not destruction.

Fourth and finally, place your hope in the Grace of Christ. Ultimately, as we have seen, Psalm 38 points beyond itself and to Jesus.

David could only plead for mercy, and in Jesus we see the fulfillment of that prayer for mercy. In Christ, we have assurance of mercy. Because of the cross, believers can say with confidence: Our sins are forgiven, our guilt is removed, and our salvation is secure.

Lens #2: Worship. We finally get our minds around the depths and profound miracle of our sins being imputed to Jesus and His righteousness being imputed to us – it will lead us to heart-humbling worship of Jesus. *The bottom line is that without imputation, there is no salvation.*

It is crucial that believers understand they are not merely forgiven—they are declared righteous. God does not say: *"You are neutral now, try to do better."* He says, *"You possess the full righteousness of My Son."*

The righteousness given to us is perfect because Christ never sinned. It is complete in Christ, and nothing can be added to it. The imputation of Christ's righteousness to us is a legal declaration of justification. It is not a gradual process but a full and complete declaration of righteousness.

We move from guilty → righteous. Our status changes instantly and permanently. You are no longer a slave to sin but a child of God. You are no longer enemies with God, but accepted, beloved children. God relates to us as He relates to Christ

The imputation of Christ's righteousness is the ground of the assurance of our salvation. If righteousness depended on us, we would always fear failure because we would always fail. However, because it is grounded in Christ's merit, it is secure and unchanging.

Finally, the imputation of Christ's righteousness is the motivational fuel to live holy lives. We don't obey to become righteous. Instead, we obey because we are righteous in Christ. Gratitude replaces fear. Love replaces striving. Delight replaces duty. All of this should result in deep, profound worship of Jesus at both the personal and corporate levels.