

Psalm 38
"The Disposition of the Penitent"
Lenten Midweek 3

February 28, 2018
First Lutheran Church, Glencoe, Minn.
Pastor Peter Adelsen

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ! Amen!

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

[Believers Face Suffering]

Many a believer in Christ faces profound suffering in this life. At times, we may think God is punishing us. At times, we may wonder if we'll be able to bear the burden. We may think it should somehow be different for God's children. But it isn't! You see, God's children are penitent, and so they see suffering, pain, and sorrow for what it is, the consequence of sin.

Martin Luther had much to say on tonight's text, Psalm 38: "This Psalm portrays most clearly the manner, words, acts, thoughts, and gestures of a truly penitent heart," Luther wrote (AE 14:156). Or, to put it another way, it shows that the Disposition of the Penitent is Clinging Faith, even with the Lord's Heavy Hand upon him.

Psalm 38 reveals to us that even believers may feel crushed by physical pain and spiritual anguish in times of suffering and trial. Such anguish is not necessarily a sign of unbelief or even of a weakening faith. Through it all, believers in Christ are called to see such afflictions as a powerful testimony of the awfulness of sin and accept even these sufferings as a warning and ministration from God, given in love and intended for good, while still clinging to God's promises and calling on Him for relief in the time and way that He knows best.

[God's Arrows]

David writes of God's arrows piercing him and God's hand coming down heavy upon him. He prays that this not be a rebuke done in anger, nor discipline done in wrath. The arrows of God's Law have sunk into each of us. Afflictions, suffering, and death are all consequences of sin. Often, we feel as though the suffering we're facing is God's direct judgment against specific sins we've committed. That's how David likely felt.

It seems David could never forget his own sins of adultery and murder—how he'd committed adultery with Bathsheba and murdered her husband, Uriah.

So, when he faced severe pain and anguish later in life, particularly the rebellion of two of his sons, David couldn't help but think that it might be a punishment from God.

Yet the truth is — that it isn't just big sins that convict us before a holy and righteous God. All our sins of thought, word, and deed are sins against God, sins that warrant His just condemnation. The Law of God reveals our sin, both the sins we commit and the sinful nature that permeates our being. Like a mirror shows the grime and dirt we may get on our faces, so the Law reveals our sin. Martin Luther writes this:

“The words with which God rebukes and threatens in Scripture are arrows. . . . However, only he feels them into whose heart they are thrust and whose conscience is terrified. It is the sensitive into whose heart God shoots the arrows. From the smug, who have become hardened, the arrows glance off as from a hard stone” (AE 14:156–57).

Our sin is a great burden we cannot bear. So David writes, ***“There is no soundness in my flesh because of your indignation; there is no health in my bones because of my sin. For my iniquities have gone over my head; like a heavy burden, they are too heavy for me”*** (vv 3–4).

You see, sin crushes us. Sin becomes heavy. We become weak.

Sin also causes us to stink before God and others, as David writes: ***“My wounds stink and fester because of my foolishness, I am utterly bowed down and prostrate; all the day I go about mourning. For my sides are filled with burning, and there is no soundness in my flesh”*** (vv 5–7). Luther writes: “Just as wounds and swellings of the body decay, fester and stink, so also the evil sores of human nature get worse and begin to stink if they are not treated and healed daily with the ointment of grace and the water of the Word of God” (AE 14:158).

Sin causes us to despair and fear God's wrath and anger, even the possibility of being forsaken by God. David cries out, ***“Do not forsake me, O Lord! O my God, be not far from me!”*** (v 21). If we were to hear only the word of God's Law, we would most certainly be crushed.

Thanks be to God that the Law is not God's last word. The Law leads us to repentance. The penitent confesses his or her sin in true sorrow. David does just that: ***“For I am ready to fall, and my pain is ever before me. I confess my iniquity; I am sorry for my sin”*** (vv 17–18). Yet David, as a true penitent, has something more. Despite the suffering, pain, and sorrow he endures, he still has hope in the Lord.

[The Penitent Waits for God's Deliverance]

Fear of God's wrath turns to patient waiting for God's deliverance in faith. And so faith in God's deliverance is also a vital part of the disposition of the penitent. The penitent ultimately trusts that affliction is done as God's loving discipline and not in wrathful judgment. The penitent trusts that in God's good time and for his good purpose, he will grant deliverance. So, even in his anguish, David proclaims, ***“But for you, O Lord, do I wait; it is you, O Lord my God, who will answer. . . . Make haste to help me, O Lord, my salvation!”*** (vv 15, 22).

The penitent knows God will answer. During David's time of suffering, he faced the challenges and rebuke of many adversaries. But he writes that he was like a deaf mute. He did not listen to their attacks, nor respond to them (vv 13–14). Instead, he waits for the Lord: ***“It is you, O Lord my God, who will answer”*** (v 15). As penitents, we cling to God's promise of deliverance alone.

The penitent knows God's deliverance in Christ. David had God's promise of one who would sit on his throne forever. Yet this royal descendant would also be David's Lord. He would be born of a woman, yet he would be the Son of God. And he would endure more suffering and pain than we could ever imagine. Jesus was crushed by the burden of our sins as he went to the cross. Jesus stood mute before his detractors as he was struck, spit upon, mocked, beaten, whipped, and crucified. Jesus was forsaken by God the Father on Calvary so we would not be forsaken by God.

- The penitent prays for God's deliverance, not primarily for relief, although relief of suffering is not abandoned.
- The penitent prays for deliverance, that God will be glorified.
- The penitent knows his weakness. Like David, the true penitent acknowledges that he is always ready to fall.
- The penitent also knows that pain, suffering, and death are consequences of sin and are always present in a fallen world.

- Yet the penitent knows God’s salvation in Christ and the promise of eternal life in heaven by grace through faith through Christ’s life, death and resurrection. Like David, the penitent makes this good confession known to others, that God will be glorified.

In Psalm 38, God shows us that the afflictions we face in life are a powerful testimony of the awfulness of our sin. Our dear Lord has called us to accept even these sufferings as his warning, given in love and intended for our good.

Our good and gracious God thereby leads us to repentance and a firm faith in His deliverance through Jesus Christ, our Lord. May God grant us this disposition—the disposition of a true penitent. Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.