

Psalm 38 • Godly Sorrow and Regret

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Psalm 38 is what we call one of the penitential Psalms. There are 6 of them, interestingly enough, in all of the 150 Psalms. Penitential is a word that comes from obviously the word penitence, and it's an expression of deep sorrow.

Penitence – deep sorrow, deep regret, not to be confused with penance, which is a completely different word altogether, although somewhat related. Penance is the idea of an act of service or even a form of self-punishment to compensate for the wrong that you've committed. Somebody might say, I'm doing this as penance to pay for my wrongdoing. Well, that's a different thing together. Penitence again is sorrow.

And because Psalm 38 is really all about sorrow and regret, it can be a challenging chapter to read because there's not a real strong high point in this Psalm. I love it when there's high points, but there aren't always high points. And I'm glad because life doesn't always produce high points.

Sometimes we're just in a period of deep regret over the kind of a life we've lived or something that's maybe happened in our life. And sorrow and regret can be a hard place to live, and that's why this song can be a hard chapter to read.

We don't know. Obviously, David had been involved in some sinful behavior. We don't know what it was. We just know that as he writes this Psalm, he is feeling the disciplinary hand of the Lord on his life. And so, he begins in verse 1 by saying:

“O LORD, rebuke me not in your anger, nor discipline me in your wrath! ² For your arrows have sunk into me, and your hand has come down on me.” (ESV)

Now, this is obviously poetic language. You and I don't talk this way when we are speaking to the Lord and talking about how rotten we feel about whatever's going on in our lives. You're probably not going to say things like, *“your arrows have sunk into me and your hand has come down on me”* or whatever.

But David is describing the hand of the Lord, which he assumes is because of some action that he took in his life that was wrong and that he feels is also

justified in the discipline he's receiving. He's not arguing about not deserving the discipline, you understand? He is simply asking the Lord not to let that discipline fall upon him in anger or wrath. And that's an important distinction. And this is frankly one of the key elements that we talk to parents about.

We went over this when we were talking about or dealing with the art of parenting video series, which we just finished up here a couple of Sunday nights ago. But discipline is one of those things we tell parents, don't ever do it in anger because it's not going to go well when you discipline your children when you're angry. You're a lot bigger than they are. You're a lot stronger than they are, and if you discipline your small child in anger, bad things are likely to happen.”

And so, the same principle that we encourage with parents is what David is asking the Lord to do. Discipline me, Lord. Fine. If I deserve discipline, I accept it. But please, Lord, let it not be in Your wrath. Let it not be out of anger.

Sometimes, God disciplines His children, and we wonder when that happens, if God's angry with us. I've had a lot of people over the years ask me when they're going through a difficult situation, which they assume may be connected with some action on their part, and they will ask me, is the Lord angry with me? Is the Lord pouring out His wrath on me? And I'll tell you the answer I give them. The answer is no.

He is not pouring out His wrath, and He is not pouring out His anger. He is disciplining you because that is how God deals with His children. Listen, the thing you need to remember, and don't ever let go of, is that Jesus bore God's wrath for you.

Because He bore God's wrath, what comes to you and I is discipline when we go astray or when we do something that we shouldn't do. The writer of Hebrews probably said it best. Let me show you here on the screen, from Hebrews 12. This is verses 6 and 11:

Hebrews 12:6,11 (ESV)

...The Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

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pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

That's a fascinating and wonderful passage, but it reminds us that God disciplines those who He calls His children. He disciplines, He chastises, as he says. And the writer very clearly tells us here that discipline is never an enjoyable thing in our lives. It is usually quite difficult, in fact, sometimes very painful. But we also know that it is always for our good.

The writer goes on to say here in Hebrews, the next verse:

Hebrews 12:10 (NIV)

Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness.

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Our fathers didn't always get it right, did they? In fact, sometimes in your upbringing, he might have been wrong a lot more than he was right. But they did what they thought was best. God never fails to do what is best when it comes to discipline in our lives. Our fathers miss the mark a lot, but God never does. And that's what the writer of Hebrews is saying here.

So, David goes on to describe the physical manifestations of the Lord's discipline. Look what he says here in beginning in verse 3. He says:

“There is no soundness in my flesh...”

Again, probably not something you and I would say. But the NIV says a little more plainly when it says: *“³ There is no health in my body because of your indignation; there is no health in my bones, (he writes) because of my sin.”* He's very clearly connecting it here to his acts of sin.

“⁴ For my iniquities have gone over my head like a heavy burden, they are too heavy for me.” And then check this out.

“⁵ My wounds stink and fester because of my foolishness, ⁶ I'm utterly bowed down and prostrate; all the day I go about mourning. ⁷ For my sides are filled with burning, and there's no soundness in my flesh. ⁸ I am feeble and crushed; I groan because of the tumult of my heart.”

David is describing real physical suffering. He is dealing with physical manifestations of the Lord's discipline in his life. And the hand of the Lord is obviously very heavy upon David at this time. So, this brings up that whole question that I know people will ask from time to time, and that is does God respond to our sin with physical manifestations of chastisement?

Well, I know a couple, or I don't know them, but I know of a couple by the name of Ananias and Sapphira, who would both say, uh, yeah!

You'll remember that they were the ones in the Book of Acts who lied to the apostles about how much money they had gained from the sale of a piece of property so that they could look better in the eyes of the people than what they were really giving. And you'll remember, they both dropped dead on the spot because of their lie, so are there sometimes physical manifestations of God's disciplinary action? Absolutely, no question about it.

There's also another passage that is given 1 Corinthians, where the apostle Paul speaks of how the Corinthians were partaking of communion in a way that was having negative consequences. Let me show you this on the screen. 1 Corinthians 11, it says:

1 Corinthians 11:29-30 (NIV)

For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep

For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord, eats and drinks judgment on himself. (And then he goes on to say,) That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep.

And remember, that term, fallen asleep, is the apostle Paul's euphemism to describe a believer's physical death. Isn't that interesting? So, because there was a real irreverence and lack of attention to this important element of the Lord's Supper, he says some of you are weak, some of you are sick, some of you have even died because of the way you did that.

So, does the Lord chastise sometimes in a physical way? Yes. Does He chastise in a physical way all the time? No. Is every sickness, illness, or infirmity an act of God's chastisement and discipline? No. We also live in a fallen world. We live in a fallen world where disease and injury and sickness just take hold of our bodies from time to time. It happens.

You and I can't look at somebody who's going through some kind of a physical infirmity and make the same mistake that Job's friends made and point the finger at him and say this is why, because you and I just don't know. And to claim to know is a great act of arrogance on our part. Could it be a possibility? Yeah, but we keep our mouth closed about it because it's between that person and the Lord.

The other thing that we need to deal with from this passage is David's sorrow, and the sorrow that David was experiencing in this passage. And the reason that's important is because when we get to the New Testament, we find out that not all sorrow is the same. There's a good sorrow, and there's a bad sorrow. Paul talked about it when he was relating to the Corinthians about a letter that he had previously written to them, which really made them sorrowful. And he talks about their reaction. Let me put it on the screen for you. From 1 Corinthians, or excuse me, 2 Corinthians 7. He says:

2 Corinthians 7:8-10 (NIV)

Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it – I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while – yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.

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In that last section, that last sentence of that passage, we learn these two different kinds of sorrow: there is worldly sorrow, and there is Godly sorrow.

Godly sorrow leads to repentance. Worldly sorrow leads to death. You know why? Because the person is only sorry they got caught. They're only sorry that the time of sin is over. They wish they could go back. They may not come out and say that, but their heart is not repentant. They're not truly sorry to God. They're sorry it's over. And there is no repentance or turning from that sin to God.

And by the way, whenever we use the word, repentance, in the Christian understanding of it, always means turning to God. It's not just turning away from sin. It's turning to God. Because if you turn away from sin, but you don't turn to God, you haven't really repented. You might have turned away for a minute or two.

But that's not true repentance. That's your brain getting the best of you and thinking to yourself, gee, I really need to stop doing this because this is hurting me. But you don't really want to stop, and that's why you don't stop for very long; you just go right back into it after a while because there hasn't been true repentance.

Okay? Whenever we use the term, turn to God, if I said to somebody, hey, turn to the Lord and accept Him as your Savior. I have mentioned already repentance, because that's what turning to the Lord is.

Paul is explaining in 2 Corinthians there those 2 kinds of sorrow. So what kind of sorrow is David experiencing? Well, obviously it's Godly sorrow, because he's turning to the Lord in this prayer. He's coming to God. He's confessing. He's laying this thing before the Lord.

You see, worldly sorrow turns people away from God. Godly sorrow turns people to God. Alright? You say, well, what's a good example of somebody having worldly sorrow? I think about the rich young ruler, challenged with giving up his wealth and following the Lord. The Bible says he turned and walked away very sad. He didn't walk to the Lord, he walked away. Jesus challenged him, go and sell everything you have and come, follow Me, walk to Me, come to Me.

And what did the rich young ruler do? He walked away. That's worldly sorrow. He was sorrowful that the answer didn't go his way, that he didn't hear what he wanted to hear, and he believed the challenge was too great for him to make. He was sorrowful, but not in any sort of a repentant sort of a way.

Verse 9, look with me in your Bible as we go on. David writes:

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

He says, my friends and my family are keeping their distance from me.

“¹² Those who seek my life lay their snares; those who seek my hurt speak of ruin and meditate treachery all day long. ¹³ But I am like a deaf man; I do not hear, like a mute man who does not open his mouth. ¹⁴ I have become like a man who does not hear, and in whose mouth are no rebukes.” In other words, David says, “I have nothing to even say in response.

“¹⁵ But for you, O LORD, do I wait; It is you, O Lord my God, who will answer.”

I want to pause here for just a moment because this is about the most upbeat part of the entire Psalm. This is at least that part of the Psalm where David expresses some kind of faith. And this again is the reminder of why David's sorrow is a Godly sorrow, because he says, I'm going to wait for You. I'm going to wait for You to restore me. I'm going to wait for You to deliver me. I'm going to wait for You to help me. And I believe that You will answer me.

What's amazing, again, about David's expression of faith at this juncture is that it is faith that comes in the face of his own personal recognition of sin and failure.

Here's my question to you. When you have failed God, and I mean failed in a big way, do you feel like you can ask God for things? Do you feel comfortable going to God when you know you've failed and really messed up; going to Him and saying, Lord, I'd like to make some requests of You.

That's just not what comes into our minds. Usually we want to go crawl in a hole and just ask God to fill it in. But look what David does. He has spent these first 14 verses explaining how sorry he is, how much he's suffering due to his own fault knowing that it was his failure.

He says repeatedly, talks about, my iniquities, my transgressions, and so on and so forth. So, he's owning this thing, right? And yet what does he say here? I'm going to wait for You, Lord.

What is he waiting for? Well, he's obviously waiting for deliverance. He's not waiting for discipline; he's already getting that. He's already getting the discipline. In other words, he's already been feeling the spanking spoon of the Lord. You know what comes after the spanking spoon? Loving kindness. Reassurance. Right, parents? Whenever we discipline our children – and discipline is never enjoyable, it's always painful. But after that happens, we go to our children and we wrap our arms around them, don't we? And we tell them how much we love them.

My kids, man, they'd be crying. I usually join them crying when I would discipline them because I hated discipline. And I've told you many times that I told my children that. When I would discipline, I would tell them, I want you to know that what I'm about to do, I hate with all my heart. But I have a responsibility before God to teach you right from wrong, and to show you how serious this thing is.

But then after that discipline was over, we'd grab onto each other and cry together, and I'd just say, I love you so much. And the kids are always in just such a repentant place at that point. They're just like, "I love you too, dad," and we're just loving each other and kissing and just, stuff and then everything's so good. But what a wonderful time that is for a parent and child.

David is waiting. He's waiting for the reconciliation now. He says, Lord, I'm going to wait for You, and You will answer me because I know the kind of God You are. I know that You're not going to discipline me and then walk away.

What a horrible thing for a child to experience too, by the way. The disciplinary action of their parent who disciplines them and then walks out of the room and does not return to reiterate or to reassure love. What a horrible thing that is. Child's just sitting there. They've been punished and there's no reassurance of love. David knew that God was different, and that He was going to come back. And it's just such a beautiful expression of David's expectation of the Lord's love.

He says in verse 16:

"For I said, "Only let them not rejoice over me, who boast against me when my foot slips!" He says:

"¹⁷ For I am ready to fall, (actually, I don't want to tell my enemies that, but I'll tell you, Lord – I am. I'm ready to fall right off the edge;) and my pain is ever before me."

Look at 18:

"I confess my iniquity. I am sorry for my sin."

Oh, those words are so important in our walk with God. *"I confess my iniquity."* What does the Bible say? If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us, right? He will forgive us and *"cleanse us from all unrighteousness."* It's a promise of God's Word, (1 John 1:9)

He says in verse 19:

“But my foes, are vigorous, that means they're strong, they are mighty and many are those who hate me wrongfully. ²⁰ Those who render me evil for good accuse me because I follow after good. ²¹ Do not forsake me, O LORD! O my God, be not far from me! ²² Make haste or hurry to help me, Oh Lord, my salvation!”

And remember, as I've said many times in our study of the Psalms, the word, salvation. David usually isn't thinking about eternal salvation when he uses that word; he's thinking about deliverance. Because the word salvation means deliverance.

I'm not saying that eternal salvation wasn't ever in David's mind, but when he prays these prayers in the midst of the kind of circumstances he's describing here, he's asking God to deliver him from those circumstances, and from his enemies. And so, when he says, *“Oh, Lord, my salvation,”* he's saying, oh, Lord, my deliverer. You are the one who delivers me.

And of course, eternal salvation comes into play there because that's the ultimate deliverance, right? If he calls Him, oh, Lord, my deliverer, Oh, Lord, my salvation, he's describing all of the deliverance that he's ultimately going to need. But in the present tense of what David is expressing here, he's asking God to deliver and declaring that God is his deliverer.