

## Prayer

Bring Your Kingdom in our midst, Lord God. Teach us how to choose and do what is right and pure, true and good; and teach us what is wrong and evil so that we reject it. Make this clear before our eyes and ears, and embed it within our souls. You Kingdom Come, we pray, O Lord; AMEN

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Weekly Theme: The Church in the Community

Pray today for any organisations which use your church, and if you hire a place of worship, pray for the organisation which runs it. The relationship between churches and organisations such as this can be good, or difficult. Satan can certainly use 'bad feeling' about practical issues to stunt the church's mission. Pray against this, and ask the Lord to bless these relationships.

## Meditation

Let us open the treasury of the Lord's gifts to all His people;  
Let us not be ashamed to be ourselves and praise the Lord!

Praise Him with every kind of music, new and old;  
Melodies that flood the soul and fill the heart with delight!

Praise Him with the light and colour of pictures and banners;  
Art that moves the spirit and lifts the mind to higher things!

Praise Him with craft and skill with wood, metal and stone;  
Architecture which honours God, the great Creator of all!

Praise Him with an entrepreneurial spirit applied to faith;  
Mission that is bold and adventurous, risking all for the Lord!

Praise Him with every gift and grace, embraced with love;  
Service which boldly proclaims the Name of our God!

Let there be no stigma of gloom attached to the church,  
Let us not be ashamed to be ourselves and praise the Lord!

## Bible Study - Psalm 38:1-10

*A psalm of David. A petition.*

<sup>1</sup> O LORD, do not rebuke me in your wrath  
or discipline me in your fierce anger.

<sup>2</sup> For your arrows have pierced me,  
and your hand has held me down.

<sup>3</sup> Because of your righteous anger, my body  
is not sound;  
my bones are not healthy because of  
my sin.

<sup>4</sup> My iniquities have overwhelmed me;  
They are a burden, too heavy to bear.

<sup>5</sup> My wounds are foul and they fester  
because of my foolishness.

<sup>6</sup> I bow down and stoop very low;

*all day long I go about in mourning.*

<sup>7</sup> My thighs are burning with pain;  
there is no health in my body.

<sup>8</sup> I am feeble and utterly broken;  
I cry out in distress because of the  
pain in my heart.

<sup>9</sup> All my desires lie open before you, O  
Lord:  
and my sighs are not hidden from  
You.

<sup>10</sup> My heart palpitates, my strength fails  
me;  
and the light in my eyes – even that  
has gone.

## Review

Psalm 38 is a remarkable and deeply spiritual psalm, but immediately after a first reading, that may not be your first reaction! The first part, which we have read today, is obviously about sin and sickness, and the writer believes without question that there is a deep spiritual connection between the two. This is not something we readily accept and some people therefore find the psalm to be offensive and do not see how it might relate to their own experience of sickness. The second half of the psalm which we read in our next study picks up the social theme of how people respond to illness, and does so, yet again, in a controversial manner. However, careful reading will show us that there is indeed a wealth of spiritual help within this psalm alongside great empathy with the feelings of those who suffer.

This is the third of the great 'Penitential Psalms' (6,32,38,51,102,130,143) recognised by the church and it is closely connected with the others. Indeed, the first verse of Psalm 38 is virtually the same as that of Psalm 6, the first Penitential Psalm. The first half of the Psalm focuses upon describing the physical and spiritual aspects of sickness. Typically of the psalms, we know nothing about the specific circumstances of the person who wrote the psalm, whether David or not, but it has several graphic images of sickness; 'my wounds are foul and they fester ...' (38:5) and 'my thighs are burning with pain' (38:7). But most significantly, the psalm works from the presumption that the sufferer is sick because of sin; 'my bones are not healthy because of my sin' (38:3). This is very different from other psalms which mostly avoid making this connection (e.g. Psalm 6) and also the book of Job, which is strongly opposed to the idea that Job has done anything wrong; indeed, Job's predicament is most certainly not his fault, and he vehemently protests his innocence.

We may safely say that the Bible does not teach that behind every illness there is a personal sin. It does talk, with exasperation, about the lack of this connection, giving examples of how sinful people often appear to have a happy life without illness (e.g. 10:3, 64:2f. etc.) despite their eventual downfall at the hands of the Lord (see Psalm 37). The Bible also frequently accepts that some people fall ill without there being any question of the involvement of sin (see the boy healed by Elisha – 2 King 4). However, we must agree with the Bible that there are times when sin does truly cause sickness either of body mind or spirit, and this is expressly the case here in Psalm 38. In truth, we all know examples of such illness; lung cancer produced by smoking, obesity and its consequences where it is related to a lack of personal discipline, and also stress or nervous breakdown which has many reasons, but amongst these are a variety of sins, for example, ungodly anger or aggression, or the moral consequences of living a life of deceit or lies. Medically, doctors are trained to make no judgement on the moral reasons for sickness, and this remains an important general principle for health care. For those who are God's people, however, we need to face the fact that sometimes sin is involved, and we need the discernment to know when this is the case. The Lord's care goes deeper than treating physical symptoms, to deal with any sin which is relevant to sickness, and this is the leap of faith we have to make if we are to minister God's healing to people in a way that goes beyond what medicine offers.

## Going Deeper

So, from this perspective, we will now look in more depth at this psalm. It is important to note that whereas most psalms which describe trouble go on to find a resolution to it through the praise of Almighty God. This is barely true of Psalm 38, though the ending of the psalm (38:22) offers some hope. Our verses today are simply a cry for help which comes from the heart.

These verses are a stark picture of dire distress in the midst of sickness, full of pain and misery, but it is one that many people who suffer chronic illness do understand today although their voice is not often heard. It reflects a sense of loneliness and despair which accompanies long term, sometimes terminal illness, and is experienced by far more people than we like to think. More than this, the simple fact that this psalm does not find a resolution to sickness through standard forms of praise and thanksgiving says something very profound to people who are suffering. Most impressively, the prayer is said without any conditions or doubt of God whatsoever. God is respected as God right at the beginning, for the psalmist does not question His right to do what He does, and although the psalm expresses severe dislike of illness and distress, God's actions are accepted without question, for good or ill. This unconditional

response to God is itself a reflection of true faith, despite the severe illness and consciousness of sin demonstrated by the psalmist. We do not always have to praise God by speaking it out; sometimes a heart of praise comes from one who simply calls on the Lord to act in justice and in love.

### ***Calling upon God to remember***

The title of this Psalm of David's collection (see the superscription at the beginning) is 'a petition', and the Hebrew word here means 'call to remembrance'. The Psalm is therefore defined right from the beginning as a call to God to remember the one who is sick and also knows that they have sinned. In the Bible, there are a number of occasions when God is described as 'remembering' His people, and each time, God's 'remembrance' comes immediately prior to His action to save His people. For example, the point at which God 'called to mind' the plight of Noah in the Ark is the point at which the waters stop rising and the floods disperse (Gen 8:1); and in Exodus, when the people of Israel called upon God, and He 'remembered' them (Exodus 2:23,24) and immediately set about delivering them from their troubles by raising up Moses to be their leader.

It is therefore true to say that from the perspective of the Old Testament, the words of Psalm 38:1-10 are the cry of a faithful soul from the midst of sin and sickness, and God will most certainly act to deliver them from both. It is presupposed that God will forgive and heal the faithful after they call on Him and confess both their sickness and their sin. We are so used to believing this to be a truth taught and demonstrated by Jesus that we have forgotten that it is part of the historic revelation of the character of God in the Old Testament.

The psalmist begins by accepting that God has a right to be 'angry' because he has sinned (38:1-3). We may find the reference to God's anger difficult, but the theology of this verse is straightforward. Sin, by definition, is our rejection of God of His ways, and of His love; the vague idea that 'sin' is a mild form of 'doing something wrong' is tragically far from the truth. If we have not turned away from the Lord, then what we have done is not sin, and if we have, it is. And there are consequences, firstly, God is hurt, and secondly, we are hurt and sometimes suffer sickness as a consequence. God's hurt is expressed in his 'righteous anger' (which is the full understanding of the word used for anger and wrath in verse 1).

The psalmist understood this very well, and in our section of the psalm sounds aggrieved that his confession has not already brought relief. He is riddled with guilt and uncertainty about whether he has dealt with the sin adequately (38:4), and goes on to call on the Lord because 'my wounds are foul and they fester because of my foolishness' (38:5). So here we have a truly repentant sinner, who is waiting upon the Lord. He has not as yet received the healing he calls for, but he persistently places his request at God's door without trying to conjure any half-hearted or false praise. This reads like the voice of real faith to me, particularly when we realise that the psalmist was not able to call on Jesus, as we are. The psalm points prophetically to the healing power of our Lord who would indeed come and dramatically heal both sickness and sin as soon as He began His ministry (Mark 2:1-12), dealing immediately with the great need around him to minister to all who humbly awaited salvation.

### ***Sickness, the great leveller.***

Some would say that it was King David who wrote this Psalm, but there is no record of David enduring a lasting or chronic condition which might have given rise to this Psalm. Others say that the Psalm refers to the great social disaster of the disease of leprosy, rife in ancient times, cutting off all who succumbed to its appalling infectious disfigurement irrespective, of class and upbringing. However, there is much more to Psalm 38 than this. The psalm has been written by someone who knows about disease, but he writes from experience, but in generalities, encompassing a variety of conditions. The 'hand of God' (38:2) is a way of talking about the oppressive consequences of sin. Fascinatingly, sin is regarded as the cause of unhealthy 'bones' (38:3) which meant the whole body structure in general (see Genesis 2:23); guilt is related to festering wounds (38:4,5); the mental condition of being brought low, possibly meaning depression, is related to "burning pain" (38:6,7), and loss of strength and vitality is related to heart palpitation (38:9-10).

It may be that these connections can help us in healing ministry, but some of them are clearly spiritual principles not just physical description; for example, it is not surprising that sin is said to lie behind a failure of the body structure; that is simply a graphic way of describing what the psalm says as a whole, and the connection of guilt with festering wounds says more about the nature of guilt in the soul than it does about any physical condition. This psalm is not best used as some kind of spiritual healing 'text book' where we can look up conditions and deal with them accordingly. All these examples point us towards coming to the Lord who alone reveals the details of our specific troubles as we counsel and pray for one another. Discernment is the key to spiritual diagnosis, guided by scriptural principles.

## **Application**

But what seems most clear to me is that the conditions of illness described in this psalm are so general that we can use this psalm when suffering a wide variety of illnesses or simply coming to the Lord as a sinner. All people are equal before sickness, as they are before sin, and there is no distinction in either between any race, class, or condition of humanity. Every one of us is liable at any moment to succumb to illness or disease, just as we are liable to be tempted and to sin, and we should not try to imply any kind of false piety because at any time in our life we happen to be well. All of us will face sickness, and we will ask ourselves, privately, whether we have done something wrong, and sinned.

As I write this piece, those of you who know me or who have read my statement on this website will know that I suffer from chronic, sometimes 'searing' pain which makes me think that Psalm 38 describes me in verse 7. Yes, I have wondered whether I have sinned, and bring that matter quietly to the Lord and to those who have counselled me. I have confessed my sin and many have prayed for me, but I have not been healed. This may mean that my condition is not related to any sin, but I still long for the Lord to heal me out of His love. I pray for it and wait for it. Also, whilst severely ill, I have prayed for others to be healed and they have been blessed by healing.

Given all of this, I find the tone of the psalm profoundly helpful and full of faith. There is no open happy praise of the Lord, but there is a deep sense of the presence of the Lord through the words of the psalm, in justice and healing power; and 'my sighs are not hidden from You' (38:9). If we read this psalm whilst we are well and there are no problems in our lives, then we may be helped to empathise with those who do suffer and be understanding of the spiritual problems that this brings. For when suffering comes and endurance is required of us, as it surely will, this psalm can be very helpful, even if it does not seem like that at first reading!

## **Questions** *(for use in groups)*

1. Do you feel that the church needs to take the connection between sin and sickness more seriously? In what ways?
2. Which parts of Psalm 38 do you find closest to your own experiences of chronic pain or sickness?
3. Is it right that we ask God to 'remember', when He knows everything anyway? What is the point of asking Him to remember us in our sickness?

## **Discipleship**

This psalm challenges our attitudes towards other people who are ill; for on the one hand it asks us to accept that there are connections between sin and sickness, but it makes it clear that we would be wrong to presume this to be a sufficient explanation of illness. On the other hand, it asks us to empathise with those who are ill and reminds us that we will face the same at some point in our lives. Perhaps the best way we can respond to the psalm is to show empathy with and understanding towards those who are ill, particularly our brothers and sisters in Christ who may question whether sin has contributed to their illness.

## **Final Prayer**

Glorious Lord; You hold my life in Your hand. You know the truth about the illnesses that have afflicted me; You show me how to deal with my sin and You are the source of my healing. Deal with me graciously, I pray, by forgiving my sins, and bringing me healing. AMEN