

Prayer

O Lord our God, You gave Your Son Jesus Christ for us and our salvation; save us, therefore, from the sin of being wholly focussed on ourselves. In our work and in all we do, help us to give other people our full attention when they refer to us or talk to us. In this and many other ways, help us to reflect the values of the Kingdom of God in all we do, to the Glory of God. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: The food we eat

Consider the food you are able to obtain and eat, and then consider what it is like for those who do not have enough to eat. Pray therefore for an equitable sharing of the world's resources of food, and the justice in international politics which would allow this to happen. When you eat your food today, say a brief pray for all who suffer through famine or malnutrition.

Meditation

O Lord my God, bring me safely to Your place of rest;
For when life is hard, I call on You to bring me peace.

Sometimes I do not know where to go, and need to ask You the way;
Sometimes I turn away when You have clearly shown me the path;
Sometimes I explore further when I am far too tired and should stop;
Sometimes I vainly hope that my own path will lead me to rest;
Sometimes I take bad advice from others to try a different route;
Sometimes I long to stop where I am, but need to walk on further;
Sometimes I tire of all the burdens I carry which slow me down;

Bring me, Lord Jesus, to that place of simple obedience,
In which I walk Your path towards my rest, and so find peace.

Bible Study - Psalm 38:11-22

- ¹¹ *My friends and neighbours avoid me
because of my affliction;
my family keep their distance.*
- ¹² *Those who seek my life set their traps,
those who seek my downfall talk of
my ruin;
they plot deception all day long.*
- ¹³ *I am like a deaf man; I do not hear!
like a mute, who does not open his
mouth;*
- ¹⁴ *I have become like one who does not
hear,
who has no reply to give.*
- ¹⁵ *It is You that I wait for, O LORD;
You will answer, O Lord my God.*
- ¹⁶ *For I pray, 'Do not let them gloat over
me'*

*For when my foot slips, they take
advantage.*

- ¹⁷ *When I am near to falling,
my pain is always with me.*
- ¹⁸ *I will therefore confess my iniquity;
for I am troubled by my sin.*
- ¹⁹ *I have numerous enemies with no cause;
and many who hate me for no reason
at all.*
- ²⁰ *Those who repay me with evil for my
good
are my opponents because I follow
what is right.*
- ²¹ *Do not forsake me, O LORD;
Do not be far from me, O my God.*
- ²² *Come quickly to help me,
O my Lord and my Salvation.*

Review

The first half of Psalm 38 was about the sickness of someone who called out to the Lord, and showed deep faith through the most distressing of personal circumstances. This faith was not expressed by joy or by attempting to stand above the illness as if it did not exist, but by calling on the Lord of all Creation to remember the suffering of the writer, and also by confession of sin, for the sufferer was content to submit everything to Almighty God. At first reading the

psalm may not seem inspiring, but it is a powerful testimony to faith in God and it is worthy of our closest attention, for nearly all of us will find ourselves chronically ill at some point in our lives and in a place where this psalm may well express something of our feelings.

The second half of the psalm is even more tragic. Its verses are not merely an incidental addition to the psalm, for they describe one of the most difficult consequences of sickness and illness. It is unfortunately true that at such times we may sometimes lose friends and find that we have enemies of which we were never aware. The reason for this is the fickle nature of human relationships. When we are strong and holding our own in the affairs of everyday life, some people will maintain friendship with us because it suits them to be associated with us in whatever we do. However, when sickness comes and we are unable to function normally in our jobs, there will be those who readily step in to take advantage of our absence or even compromise our employment; again, because it suits their own intentions to do so. It is part of the sinful side of human nature that some people will climb on the misfortune of the ill or sick in order to further their own prospects. We can observe this today, and it is but a modern reflection of what has always been true; when you are ill, you discover who your friends are, and who they are not! Psalm 38 tells us in our reading today that it was true of the most ancient of societies. Our passage begins poignantly, 'my friends and neighbours avoid me because of my affliction; my family keeps their distance.' (38:11)

Psalm 38 describes the sense of powerlessness that any of us can feel in such circumstances (38:13,14), yet faith in the Lord God is shown by the psalmist who turns to the Lord; 'it is You that I wait for, O Lord; You will answer O Lord my God' (38:15) accompanied by confession of sin; 'I will therefore confess my iniquity; for I am troubled by my sin.' (38:18). It takes great bravery to follow the path of faith when under the stress of broken relationships and the strain of facing enemies, but this is clearly what the Psalm suggests we do. It is by keeping close to what we know to be true that we may find our way through the troubles of such times.

The whole psalm closes with a further appeal to the Lord not to forsake the psalmist and sufferer, but as the final words are said, 'do not forsake me ... come quickly to help me O my Lord and my Salvation,' faith is shown that even though family and friends distanced themselves and neighbours taken advantage, the Lord never acts like this. He is faithful and will always stand by the side of those who call on Him; particularly those who suffer unjustly.

Going Deeper

But who are the real enemies in this psalm? What kind of illnesses could explain the reactions described in these verses? By asking these questions we are led deeper into Psalm 38, and although there is at least one straightforward answer to this, there is also one that is a little different from what you might expect. It explains something important about the Psalm which points forward to an important work of Jesus Christ's ministry, and should not be forgotten.

Friends and enemies?

When we are trying to live through difficult times such as illness, we do not give full attention to the social niceties of our day, and easily find ourselves manipulated by others. It is certainly my experience that when you are ill, other people assume all manner of things about you without asking you. This is reflected in the anguish of verse 12 to 16. Verse 12, talks of 'those who seek my life ... they plot deception.' If you were ill and discovered that your friends and neighbours were acting in deception, you might well be utterly shocked. Verse 13 describes this sense of shock very well 'I am like a deaf man ... I can offer no reply' (v13,14). What can you say to defend yourself when decisions are taken about you in your absence, for example? The sufferer goes on by appealing to God "do not let them gloat over me" for when my foot slips, they take advantage'. (v16).

We may like to think that society today treats those who are ill with more dignity than in ages past, but that is debatable. Nowadays, great discrimination is experienced by people who suffer the indignity and alienation of disability, for example. In days gone by, it was those who suffered the dreadful illness of leprosy (and some other contagious diseases) who suffered a similar alienation. Those who contracted this dreadful disease were cast out of their communities, not always for good reasons. Leprosy and infection were not properly understood, and many people suffered rejection by society quite needlessly, living in outcast communities away from friends and loved ones and with little hope of ever being re-united with families. Jesus broke through these barriers

by touching a leper (Matthew 8:3), and thus showed that he had the power and authority to break these social and ritual taboos. Here in the Old Testament, Psalm 38 provides a clear example of how God was always concerned to hear the cry of the outcast, rejected for no other reason than illness. Much of the psalm expresses very well the plight of those who had leprosy.

The grip of evil powers

So far in our analysis of this text, we have considered two different scenarios for the reasons why friends and neighbours might abandon someone at a time of illness, firstly, the sins of human nature by which people try to take advantage of someone who is weak, and secondly the alienation of those who were ill in ancient times because of social fears about infection and the spread of disease (such as leprosy). In each age, it seems, there are different excuses for the same appalling behaviour towards those who are ill, but when enemies are mentioned again in verse 19 and 20, the picture is more subtle, and neither of the two explanations offered so far seems to fit. 'I have numerous enemies with no cause ... those who repay me evil for good ...' (38:19,20). This is a different kind of enemy, more like a spiritual enemy.

When we are ill and suffering from the effects of any distress, it can seem to us that enemies surround us on every side, for everything we do seems to be met with trouble. The Old Testament speaks only rarely of the works of Satan, but it does talk of the presence and reality of evil in many places. In these verses, 'those who repay me evil for good' sound very much like the demonic agents of evil which we come across much more in the New Testament, for example, the demons that Jesus cast out of people sometimes to heal them of sickness. It is a mystery why some people are held in sickness by demonic powers, but there is no doubt that the Bible accepts that this is part of how sickness is explained. Perhaps it is simply Satan's way of keeping good people down and which prevents them from doing the things of God.

It is not easy to explain to people today that the reason for some sickness might be demonic activity, but amongst God's people it should be possible if we trust Scripture, and know its teaching. If we read the New Testament and accept the work of Jesus in casting out demons, then we should be prepared to accept the possibility that we might be so affected ourselves. It is tragic that many people are affronted by the suggestion that they are held in the grip of demonic powers when the simple fact is that if this is the case, then the cure is very simple; deliverance by the name and authority of Jesus Christ. It is significant that verses 19 and 20 which hint at this aspect of illness are surrounded by verses which talk firstly about the confession of sin (38:18) and secondly call on the Lord for help and salvation (which in Hebrew could read 'deliverance'); and these are two key features of deliverance ministry.

Many psalms talk of spiritual battles with evil, and there is no reason why this should not be the case in the description of illness within this psalm.

Peace with God.

Right at the end of the Psalm are two verses which bring it to an end (38:21,22), and these contain three calls upon the Lord. The first two are negative and begin with 'do not ...' and the last one is positive 'come quickly ...'. It is an interesting fact which has long been noticed, that each of these calls has a parallel in the most famous of the Penitential psalm, Psalm 22.

1. v22a: 'do not forsake me' – see Ps 22:2
2. v22b: 'do not be far from me' – see Ps 22:12
3. v23: 'come quickly to help me' – see Ps 22:20

Some scholars have noted that whilst Psalm 22 (and perhaps also Psalm 6) was used liturgically within worship to assist those in distress or in extreme circumstances, Psalm 38 was used essentially privately. It is suggested that Psalm 38 was not a psalm that was used publicly in the Temple at Jerusalem, but it was used as a private prayer, and the purpose of the last two verses was therefore to remind the user of the liturgies of confession and worship that was used in the Temple. This encouraged the user to do the right thing and offer worship in the Jerusalem Temple to Almighty God.

It is hard to know whether this can possibly be true, but it is certainly true that the last two verses connect with other psalms of worship. 'Do not forsake me, O Lord' is a phrase found in Psalms 27:9, 71:9,18, 119:8, 138:8. 'Do not be far from me' is a phrase found in Psalms 22:11, 35:22, 71:12. 'Come quickly to help me' is found in Psalms 22:19, 114:1. They are certainly

standard phrases of worship which expressed the hope of help from God and also the confidence of a worshipper that the Lord would indeed do what was asked.

The whole Psalm does not contain any other 'resolution' apart from these last two verses, but perhaps they are enough, because they do express faith and confidence in God. You cannot just repeat these words as formulae; it would be an empty gesture to do that after bringing such a calamitous state of affairs to God in prayer as indicated by the Psalm as a whole. These verses indicate that the worshipper is close enough to the Lord to ask Him to do what it is in His nature to do; to come to our help and save us. Even though the circumstances may be hard, it is enough.

Application

I have recently spoken to a man who has been unable to work for more than six months due to injuries at work, fully certified by doctors, and yet has been left with benefits that leave his family in very difficult circumstances. At the point of his return to work, he was not able to return to his former job because his employer had filled the post, and he was left effectively as a general workman whereas before his illness he had a skilled job. Everyone was, of course, so 'very' understanding, or so they said, and what could a company do but fill the job? As you read this, you will either see this story from the point of view of the sufferer or not. If you do, you will see how it feels that those who you once thought were your friends and colleagues have become devious friends, preying upon your undeserved weakness in a way that this Psalm describes very well. You may have experienced something similar, and Psalm 38 can be a spiritual help.

Beyond this, the Psalm hints at the spiritual aspects of illness and the work of the enemy, Satan, in holding good people down by means of sickness. It is very important to observe that the New Testament is the place to go in order to find out how to exercise the deliverance ministry properly in the same manner as Jesus, but Psalm 38 alerts us to the reality of this difficult area of illness. Nothing, of course, is impossible for our Lord, and there is no need for any of us to be afraid of either earthly enemies or heavenly ones. Our God has the victory over them all, and it is in that spirit that the Christian healing ministry is performed. We do not presume that God will deal with problems and illness immediately just because we ask, but we do delight in the privilege of asking God, the Creator of the Universe, to forgive our sins and heal our sicknesses; 'come quickly to help me, O my Lord and my Salvation.'

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Have you had a period of illness and discovered that people have changed their attitudes to you as a consequence? What does this feel like?
2. Discuss the significance of the works of evil (vv19,20) within this psalm, and whether it is necessary for a full explanation of the psalm.
3. Are the last two verses a sufficient expression of genuine faith? As a Christian, what would you wish to add in order to call on the help of the Lord?

Discipleship

Would you find it hard to accept the possibility that Satan could cause illness in you in order to hold you back from doing the Lord's work, for whatever reason? Some people believe this is impossible for we have given Jesus full reign in our lives, and Satan cannot get in. Others would argue that as long as we live in this world, we are always susceptible to the evils of this world, and such problems are always possible. Check out whether you can accept this. The deliverance ministry amongst God's people described in the New Testament will not make sense unless you know where to stand on such questions!

Final Prayer

Send me on my way, heavenly Father. Send me in the morning to do the work you would have me do. Send me every day to accomplish Your will. Send me to illustrate Your Word within the world. Send me to proclaim through word and deed the glories of the One who loves His creation, and so bear witness to the glory of God; my Saviour Jesus Christ. AMEN.