

Psalm 38 – True Confession and Repentance

A Rare Apology

When was the last time you heard a public figure apologise? We are used to politicians denying or explaining away their mistakes; blaming the opposition. But admit they've done something wrong? Never! Well on the 10th of October, 2007, the world saw a rare apology from someone who had been the fastest woman in the world. Marion Jones admitted that she was guilty of steroid abuse and lying to a federal agent.

She said, "Making these false statements to federal agents was an incredibly stupid thing for me to do, and I am responsible fully for my actions. I have no one to blame but myself for what I have done... I recognise that by saying I'm deeply sorry, it might not be enough, to address the pain and hurt that I have caused you. Therefore I want to ask for your forgiveness for my actions. I have asked Almighty God for my forgiveness. Having said this, and because of my actions, I am retiring from the sport of track and field, a sport which I deeply love." It's the most heartfelt apology I have ever heard (you can watch it on YouTube).

Today, as we look at Ps 38, we see one of the most powerful men in the world admit that he has done the wrong thing. And humbly throw himself on the mercy of God. It's in this confession that we see a godly response to sin. And he brings glory to God his Saviour. Why don't we pray as we look at this passage.

1. Sometimes Suffering is due to our Sin

This psalm is written by King David, the greatest King in Israel's history. And the first thing we see is that David is suffering. And it's a crushing experience:

Psalm 38:3-4 Because of your wrath there is no health in my body; there is no soundness in my bones because of my sin. ⁴ My guilt has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear.

He knows that it is God rebuking him. It's not just the general suffering that we have from being in the world. He knows it's due to his sin. See most suffering we experience is just because we live in a fallen world. Life is full of sickness, frustration and sadness. Now our world is fallen because of the general sin of humanity. But not every bit of suffering is caused by a specific sin. Every time we suffer we don't need to think, 'God is punishing me because I've done something wrong.'

But *sometimes*, suffering is directly related to our sin. We're not sure what David has done here, but we know he's done the wrong thing. David suffers physical suffering and mental anguish over his guilt.

Psalm 38:4-5 My guilt has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear. ⁵ My wounds fester and are loathsome because of my sinful folly.

David knew that he is suffering as a direct consequence of his sin. And those last few words in v. 5, 'because of my sinful folly' are helpful. Sometimes we experience the consequences of sin, even though we are forgiven. David could sacrifice an animal to be forgiven, but the effects of his foolish choices would still affect him.

We have an even greater assurance of forgiveness, since we know Jesus has sacrificed his life for us. But we still experience the effects of our sin. If you commit adultery, it will wreck your marriage and your life. Watching

porn will affect your intimacy with your spouse. Giving way to anger and treating others badly will break relationships. Lying destroys trust. David suffered in his relationships too:

Psalm 38:11 My friends and companions avoid me because of my wounds; my neighbors stay far away.

Even after we have repented and been forgiven, we can still feel the effects of our sin. Marion Jones asked God for forgiveness, and we know that God is merciful and would have forgiven her. But she was still stripped of her 5 medals from the Sydney Olympics. And in 1 Corinthians, Paul says that because the church was dishonouring the body of Christ in the way they ate the Lord's supper, many of them were sick and some had even died.¹

So, when we suffer, it's right to ask, 'Is there something I have done that I need to repent of?' We can ask God to reveal secret sins in our hearts by his Holy Spirit. And by his gracious help, we can turn away from them. As David prays in Psalm 139, 'Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.²⁴ See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.'

On the other hand, we don't need to get bogged down in our guilt. If we pray, and the Holy Spirit doesn't call to mind specific sins, then we don't need to keep worrying. We can rest in the fact that we are forgiven, because Christ has died for us.

There are some churches that teach we need to confess every single sin, otherwise we won't be forgiven. And if we fail to do that, then we will have to pay for those sins in purgatory after we die. But that is completely unbiblical. The Bible says that Jesus' death was enough to cover all our sins: past, present and future. Hallelujah.

God doesn't call to mind our sins to trap us in our guilt, but so that we can turn away from them and grow in godliness. Brothers and sisters, are there areas in our lives where God is showing us we need to repent?

2. Honesty and confession are what God Wants

Even though this psalm is hard to read because of how much suffering is in it, it's actually a really godly response to sin. And a great example for us. David doesn't blame someone else. That's what Adam did in the garden. He blamed Eve, and then hid from God. David doesn't hide or pretend he hasn't done anything wrong. He is completely open and honest with God.

Psalm 38:9 All my longings lie open before you, Lord; my sighing is not hidden from you.

This is a very confronting psalm in our culture. We don't want to think we're sinful. We just want approval. We want God to make us feel good about ourselves. We blame our culture, or religion or the church for our failures. Or we blame our parents for messing us up. But actually, when we have done the wrong thing, what we really need is to be honest with God, and let him take our sins away.

I remember at a previous church, a couple started coming along who were long-term members of a charismatic church. Every week they would go along and hear that God believes in them. God wanted to bless them and make them feel good. He had great plans for their life. But they never heard about sin. And when they heard us

¹ 1 Corinthians 11:29-30

confessing our sins to God, one of them said, 'This is so refreshing. In our old church we never talked about sin. But I know that I'm a sinner. I need to know how to confess and be forgiven for my sins.'

The psalm alternates between David praying to God, and describing his sin and suffering, then praying to God again. In all his suffering and confession, he doesn't turn *away* from God. He is completely vulnerable before God. And that's the kind of response God wants from us. 'That's what leads to restoration and joy before God.

How often do we make excuses for our sin? Like, 'I was really tired, that's why I shouted at my kids.' Or, 'Well if you hadn't ignored me yesterday, then maybe I'd be in a better mood today.' We blame, and deny and explain away our wrongs, when what God wants is honesty in our hearts.

We as believers in Jesus know that he has forgiven us. But that doesn't mean we can do whatever we want because God will just forgive us. That would be cheap grace. I remember watching those mafia movies when I was growing up. And the mob would be money laundering, extorting people, growing their business through greed. And then people would witness their crimes. And what would the mob do? They'd bump off 5 or 6 guys. Kill them and throw them in the river. Just to cover up their wrongs. And then they'd go to the church, enter the confessional and say, 'Forgive me Father for I have sinned.' Repeat a few meaningless prayers and think they're forgiven. The complete lack of remorse and accountability is horrifying. God will not be mocked. He knows that is not true confession.

But David understands that God knows everything he has done, and he should be judged. So he humbly confesses and throws himself on God's mercy. And this means he is not judgemental, even on his enemies who heap abuse on him.

Psalm 38:12 Those who want to kill me set their traps, those who would harm me talk of my ruin; all day long they scheme and lie.

Psalm 38:14 I have become like one who does not hear, whose mouth can offer no reply.

He's basically saying, 'I can't answer my enemies, because I've done the wrong thing. But they're sinners too. Why should they boast over my suffering?. At least I'm admitting I've done the wrong thing.' In v. 18, he says, 'I confess my iniquity; I am sorry for my sin.' So all he can do is entrust himself to God to deal with his enemies. He ignores their taunts, and says all he cares about is what God thinks about him.

Brothers and sisters, are we honest before God and confess our sins to him? Either we can own up to them now, or on judgement day. Either way, our hearts are bare before God. And what he really wants is honesty and confession, not pretense.

3. We can Be Confident that God is our Saviour

One of the most encouraging things about this Psalm, is that in all his sin and suffering, David is confident that God will restore him. Not because of his goodness, but because he knows the character of God.

Psalm 38:15 Lord, I wait for you; you will answer, Lord my God.

Why does he wait for the Lord? What gives him confidence that God will answer him? It's because God has promised to be his God and bless the world through him. He has inherited the promises to Abraham. And God has promised that one of David's descendants will rule forever.

Well David's greatest descendant is the Lord Jesus. Jesus is the promised seed, through whom all nations of the earth will be blessed. Through his death and resurrection, we know that he is the King who will rule forever. And 'all who call on the name of the Lord will be saved.'

But how do we know that we will be forgiven? I think the last two verses of this psalm are the most encouraging part.

Psalm 38:21-22 *Lord, do not forsake me; do not be far from me, my God.* ²² *Come quickly to help me, my Lord and my Savior.*

David knows that sin is not just about doing wrong things. Sin is about our relationship with God. Sin causes distance between us and God, and relationship with God is the most precious thing in the world. It is what we have been created for. So he pleads with God to not forsake him or be far from him. And he clings to the truth that God is his Saviour. He is so confident in his relationship with God that he says, 'Come quickly to help me, my Lord and my Savior.'

Sin is not about keeping a tally of wrongs. At its heart, sin is a personal offence to our loving God. It's saying that we don't want him to rule over us. And in the end, when God judges the world, he will give people what they ask for, which is independence from God: an eternity away from the presence of the Lord, which is Hell.

David can't think of anything worse and begs God not to forsake him. This is what all of us deserve. We deserve to be forsaken by God. But the only person who always loved God and lived to please him was his dear Son, Jesus Christ. Yet he is the very one who climbed up a hill in Calvary and was crucified for us. He didn't just suffer physically, but especially spiritually. As he hung on the cross, he felt the full consequences of our sin. Though he didn't deserve it, he felt the anger of God, the pain in the relationship. And he cried out, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'. Our Lord Jesus felt forsaken, so that we would not be forsaken. He was punished so that we could cry out, 'Lord do not forsake me, do not be far from me, my God.' And because of his sacrifice, we can echo the words of David, 'Come quickly to help me, my Lord and my Saviour.'

Because Jesus has taken God's wrath and punishment for our sins, we know that God will not punish us. The book of Hebrews says that God disciplines us for our good, that we might share in his holiness. If we go back to the first 2 lines of this psalm, we see that David's cry for mercy is fulfilled in Jesus.

Psalm 38:1 *Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath.*

He knows he needs rebuke and discipline, but he begs that it will not be in anger or in wrath. Now we know that God does not punish his children. But he disciplines us out of love. And even the suffering we experience is used by God to make us more like Jesus. So we can share in his holiness and be with him forever. Even in the midst of our sin, we like David, can be confident that God alone is our Saviour. Let's pray.