

Most modern commentaries suggest that the occasion for this Psalm is some sort of sickness.

We need to be careful not to assume too much about the actual experience of the Psalmist
because we don't know why he wrote this.

If this is being written for the public worship of Israel,
then the Psalmist may or may not have been personally going through this
when he wrote it.

The point of Psalm 38 is not that the author was suffering when he wrote it.

The point of Psalm 38 is God is the God of my salvation –
even in the midst of my suffering.

Structurally, the Psalm is set up with three parts,
each beginning with the Psalmist addressing God –
and each including three problems,
boiling down to your indignation, my sin, other people, and my suffering.

The whole Psalm then concludes with a final appeal for help.

So Psalm 38 can help us think through the interrelationship of the different problems in life.

We are alienated from God – that comes first.

We are alienated from others – both friends and enemies.

And we are alienated from ourselves – both spiritually through sin,
and physically through disease and other bodily suffering.

Each of the three sections of the Psalm works through this in different ways.

But first, we should at least note the title:

A Psalm of David, for the memorial offering.
(literally, “for remembrance”)

This particular form of the word “to remember”

suggests a memorial –
which is why the ESV translates it “for the memorial offering.”

1 Chronicles 16:4 says that David had appointed some of the Levites to invoke
(literally, to remember) the LORD.

It is likely that Psalm 38 (and Psalm 70, which also bears this inscription)
were to be used for this particular part of the liturgy.

Why is this important?

Because we need to understand that this Psalm
is not merely a statement of personal experience.

This Psalm is part of the temple liturgy.
This Psalm is not first and foremost about *me*.

It is first and foremost about the Davidic king.
It is first and foremost about Jesus.

And when we see Psalm 38 in this way –
when we see Psalm 38 as part of this memorial offering –
as the people of God remember the suffering and deliverance of Jesus –
our own suffering comes into proper focus.

This is a Psalm of David –
whether by David, about David, for David isn't the point.
It is a David-centered Psalm –
and therefore it is all about Christ!

And when you see Christ and his sufferings at the center of history
then your own suffering can begin to make sense.

Until you see the cross at the center of history,
your own suffering is pointless.
This is why we need to see Psalm 38 as a Psalm of remembrance –
a Psalm for the memorial offering.

1. Your Hand Against Me (v1-2)
a. Your Indignation, My Sins and My Suffering (v3-8)

38:1 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.

Psalm 38 opens with a frank admission that I am entirely in your hands.
Verses 1-2 state plainly that the source of the Psalmist's pain is God.

These are God's arrows that have sunk into him.
This is God's hand that has come down upon him.

As we will see throughout the Psalm,
the Psalmist will speak of various sources of suffering:
my sin (v3)
my wounds (v5)
my friends who desert me (v11)
my foes (v19).

But I start with *my God*.

Because it is my God who has brought me to this place.
And if my God rebukes me in anger –
and disciplines me in wrath –
then I am doomed.

The Psalmist understands that my folly, my festering sores, my fickle friends, and my foes
are all bearable if God has mercy.

Each of our three sections has an opening appeal to God,
followed by an extended meditation on “my troubles.”

Verses 3-8 have the first meditation on my troubles.
The key conjunction in this first meditation is “ki” –
which is a Hebrew conjunction meaning “for” or “because.”
“Ki” is a very common conjunction,
but especially in poetry it often function to explain *why* something is happening.
And Hebrew poets often use it to signal “key” points in the Psalm.

Certainly in this first stanza it is very important.
Verse 2 is a “ki” verse.
If you discipline me in wrath I am trouble – why?

For (ki) your arrows have sunk into me.

Likewise we see the word “ki” in verses 4 and 7.
To see how this works, look at verses 3-8.

There are two couplets (v3-4)
(the ki- clause in v4 focuses on my sin),

*3 There is no soundness in my flesh because of your indignation;
there is no health in my bones because of my sin.*

*4 For my iniquities have gone over my head;
like a heavy burden, they are too heavy for me.*

then there is a triplet rooted in my foolishness (v5-6)

5 My wounds stink and fester because of my foolishness,

Literally, “because of my empty-headedness.”
As Bryan Estelle has said,
empty-headedness “is to vacate one’s mind from the good one know he should do.
In other words, it is deliberate emptying of the mind, or disregard,
it is deliberately not choosing the correct moral thing to do
even when one know what that thing is!”

So the reason why:
*6 I am utterly bowed down and prostrate;
all the day I go about mourning.*

is because of my foolishness.
I have made a mess of my life.
I brought this upon myself.
I'm an idiot.
I knew what I should have done – and I didn't do it!
I knew that this was a terrible decision – but I did it anyway!

The first verb “bowed down” or “bent”
seems to have the idea of twisting with pain –
perhaps even being “out of one's mind” with pain.

Just think about the psychological effect of pain.
As Craigie puts it,
“what starts as an affliction of the body
can gradually become an affliction of the mind and spirit.
Like rust and rot, diseases can eat away at the very foundations
upon which life is established.
The foundations of life, in Hebrew theology,
rested upon two fundamental relationships,
the first with God and the second with fellow human beings.
Disease [can eventually] undermine these two relationships:
God becomes distant; his wrath is more evident than his love
and there is a perpetual awareness of the fact
that God appears to have forsaken the sufferer.
Human beings also become distant:
acts of love become distorted into hatred
and real enemies grow beyond the proportions of reality.
It is all a part of the process of illness,
whereby the various agonies of the body
become eventually the agonies of the mind.” (Craigie, 305)

Psalm 38 reflects on how disease is not merely a physical affliction.
It is not a simplistic: I sin therefore I get sick.
But rather, disease itself can become the occasion for a growing distance
between me and God,
and between me and my fellow man.

And this becomes especially clear as we come to the third and final “ki” to the first stanza
Because the first stanza ends with two couplets (v7-8)
with the ki- clause in v7 bringing the first stanza to a close in misery and pain.

*7 For my sides are filled with burning,
and there is no soundness in my flesh.
8 I am feeble and crushed;
I groan because of the tumult of my heart.*

Follow the “ki’s” (the “for’s”) through the first stanza –
“For your arrows have sunk into me...”
“For my iniquities have gone over my head...”
“For my sides are filled with burning...”

It is true that Psalm 38 assigns the first cause to God.
And the Psalmist blames this on himself and his sin.

But the occasion – the final key to understanding the Psalmist’s plea –
is the physical trial – the agony of the disease itself.

The second stanza then remains in the pit of despair
as the Psalmist remains in the grip of this disease:

2. My Longing Before You (v9)

a. My Friends, My Enemies, and My Helplessness (v10-14)

Again, structurally after the introductory appeal to God,
there are two couplets
followed by a triplet (v12)
and then two couplets.

*9 O Lord, all my longing is before you;
my sighing is not hidden from you.*

Two things, both significant, can be noted from the Psalmist here:
1) he has confidence that he is being heard,
and 2) the basis of this is his recognition of God’s omniscience.

Even in the midst of his agony he remembers to whom he is speaking!
Never forget who God is!
He sees – he knows –
nothing is hidden from his sight!

*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.*

In the first stanza the focus was on my alienation from God.
Now, in the second stanza, the focus will be on my alienation from other humans.

As my disease worsens,
even my friends stand aloof –
everyone abandons me!

This was true for Job in his sufferings –
it was true for the lepers and others afflicted by disease in the OT –
but it was above all true of our Lord Jesus Christ,
as he was abandoned by his disciples and friends.

And when face this in our own experience
we must remember that a servant is not greater than his master.
Our consolation comes from knowing that God is conforming us to the likeness of our Savior.

Verse 12 is the central triplet.
The triplet in verses 5-6 centered on my foolishness leading to misery,
but this triplet focuses on the role of my enemies in my downfall.

*12 Those who seek my life lay their snares;
those who seek my hurt speak of ruin
and meditate treachery all day long.*

Notice that my enemies are not the cause of my misery.
They simply make it worse!

My misery is rooted in God's discipline and my foolishness –
but my enemies take every opportunity they can to trap me.

Do not blame others for your misfortune!
Do not accuse others of "making you" sin.
"The Devil made me do it" will not work before God!
(Eve tried it – it didn't work then either!)

Nonetheless, it is appropriate to complain about your enemies to God.
God will bring justice.
He *will* make all things right in the end.

*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.*

This final pair of couplets concludes the stanza by showing the Psalmist's helplessness.
Indeed, one could say the Psalmist's relentless helplessness.

Why do I put it that way?
Verses 12-14 do something rather unusual for the Psalms.

Each verse begins with an “and.”

In Hebrew poetry “and” (“waw”) is rather unusual at the beginning of a line.
You’ll note that the translators left it untranslated in verses 12 and 14,
and translated it “but” in verse 13.
But the effect of a “waw” here is to give something of a “run-on” feel to this.

Certainly it tends to connect verses 12-14 more closely:
And those who seek my life lay their snares;
and those who seek my hurt speak of ruin;
and they meditate treachery all day long;
and I am like a deaf man – I do not hear,
and I am like a mute man who does not open his mouth;
and I have become like a man who does not hear,
and in whose mouth are no rebukes.

In other words, my deafness and muteness are resolutely connected
to *their* treacherous speaking and plotting.

Of course, again, we see that this was most profoundly true of our Lord,
who did not answer his accusers,
but in the face of relentless false accusation
did not open his mouth,
but as a sheep before its shearers is silent,
so he went to the cross.

3. I Wait for the LORD to Hear Me (v15-16) **a. My Pain, My Sin and My Foes (v17-20)**

But in response to the relentless use of the “waw” in verses 12-14
as I am helpless before my foes,
verses 15-18 each begin with a “ki.”

And while the “waws” drove me into silence and despair,
the “kis” restore my voice.
15 But for you, O Lord, do I wait;

(There is no “but” here – it is simply: “For you, O LORD, do I wait!”)

it is you, O Lord my God, who will answer.

And then we have our second ki:

*16 For I said, “Only let them not rejoice over me,
who boast against me when my foot slips!”*

Note that the Psalmist’s speech begins with an appeal against his enemies.
“Let them not rejoice over me!”

Do not give them the victory, O Lord!

Because our third ki takes us back to my misery:

*17 For I am ready to fall,
and my pain is ever before me.*

And the fourth ki, unfortunately, was left untranslated!

*18 [For] I confess my iniquity;
I am sorry for my sin.*

The “kis” (the conjunction “for”) takes us back through our situation:
Starting with God – for we must always start with him! –
the Psalmist moves from his plea about his enemies
(let them not rejoice over me)
to his plea about his disease (I am ready to fall)
before finally coming back to his own sin.

The Psalmist had started by saying that God’s hand was upon him because of his sin.
Yes, disease and other people can make it hard to walk before God.
But nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus –
therefore, nothing should stop you from repenting
and confessing your sin to God.

Now, some might say,
“How can Jesus be the singer of this Psalm?
Jesus had no sin to confess!”

That is true.
He committed no sin.
And he was free from the taint of original sin –
so he couldn’t even confess for Adam’s iniquity!

But on the cross, he who knew no sin *became* sin for us.
The whole point of all those sin offerings throughout the Old Testament
had been to show us that you could take our sins and lay them on a sacrifice.

And thus the sacrifice would bear the sin of the people.

Hebrews 10:4 reminds us that it is not possible for the blood of bulls and goats
to take away our sins.

But all those pictures were pointing to the one sacrifice that could.

When Jesus took our sins upon himself he confessed our iniquity to the Father.
As the atoning sacrifice he bore our sins and iniquities.

But after these “kis” bring me to the solution:
the confession of my sin –

I am brought up short with one more “waw” –
one more “and” (or “but” – it can mean either).

*19 But my foes are vigorous, 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.*

Indeed, when our Lord Jesus took our sins upon himself,
and endured the wrath and curse of God,
he also endured the wrath and hostility of men.

One commentator (Kraus, p. 414), points out,
“In his death on the cross Jesus suffers the distress of utter forsakenness,
for even his relatives and friends stand apart from him.
Jesus Christ stands in solidarity with outcasts . . .
and makes their fate his own.
In this even God confronts all sufferers as their help and salvation.”

And so the Psalmist concludes:

4. Do Not Forsake Me (v21-22)

*21 Do not forsake me, O Lord!
O my God, be not far from me!
22 Make haste to help me,
O Lord, my salvation!*

This Psalm is as timely now as it ever was, since sickness still plagues us.

Craigie rightly says “the Psalmist offers no ready solution to these problems,
nor does he have anything more than hope that his estate in life will be changed.
The only possibility of a solution to the problems [of suffering]
is to be found in the very existence of the psalm;

the psalmist, in other words, continues to pray despite his despair.
There is little logic in his act,
for he believes God caused the sickness and he thinks God has forsaken him.
But he still prays, as do all those have used this psalm and made it their own.
And the very act of praying, in the context of perpetual sickness,
reveals a deep-seated belief in God,
beyond logic and beyond the evidence of the present circumstances.
God may be a judge of sin;
He may be distant from the sinner.
God may even activate appalling disease as part of his purpose....
But he continues to pray, because beyond all the evidence,
he continues to believe that God is loving and merciful” (p. 305).

But why does he believe (beyond all the evidence) that God is loving and merciful?

Remember the title.
“For the memorial offering”
(or for remembrance).

Deuteronomy had said over and over again,
“remember the LORD your God”
“do not forget what the LORD has done”

At the very heart of worship –
at the very heart of the Christian life –
is remembering who God is and what he has done.

Remember the LORD your God.
Do not forget.
Even in the midst of suffering and disease
when you cannot imagine how a good God could ever do this!
Remember that Jesus was there first.

Do not forsake me, O LORD!
O my God, be not far from me!
Make haste to help me, O LORD of my salvation!

Close with Psalm 38