

Ponderings in the Psalms

The following is a Messianic Study on

Psalm 38

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The *Pondering* studies were published in the Brit Chadashah Newsletter. Brit Chadashah (*New Covenant*) is a Messianic Fellowship in Sydney. Led by Paul Cohen a Jewish believer in Messiah Yeshua (Jesus). We meet together fortnightly for Bible studies from a Messianic Jewish Perspective. We are a unique fellowship made up of Jewish and Gentile people who are believers in Yeshua as the promised Messiah of Israel.

If you don't know Yeshua as your Messiah, we encourage you to search out the Scriptures for yourself. God promised in the book of Jeremiah, "*You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart*" (Jeremiah 29:13). And we hope you will make contact with us so that we can share more about the Messiah, His life and ministry.

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Pondering Psalm 38

Before expounding on this psalm let me reiterate what I have said before, and no doubt will say again: Not all sickness is Divine punishment, in fact, most sickness is not a punishment from God. Think about Job, he was “*blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil*” (Job 1:8), yet he suffered more than most of us ever will. Sometimes sickness is just our bodies being rundown, sometimes it is stress, and sometimes it is the sin of the world that is bearing down on all of creation (Romans 8:22). And yes, sometimes it is our sin.

Introduction

Author, Date, genre & superscript

The author is David, which gives us an approximate date of about 1000 B.C.E. The superscript (verse 1, see also Psalm 70) reads “*for a memorial*” (NASB), “*for the memorial offering*” (ESV). These follow the Greek translation which has “*for remembrance concerning the Sabbath-day*”. The Hebrew, which is much plainer “*לְהַזְכִּיר*” (*lehazkir*), means to remember, or remembrance (cf. 1 Kings 17:18). David *calls to mind* (remembers) the folly he had committed, and as the effects were impounding on his body, it was then that he sought mercy and made a confession of his sins.

Because of the repetitiveness of words like sin, iniquities and folly, this psalm is seen as a penitential psalm (some other penitential are Psalms 32, 38, 51, 103). Interestingly, David does not name the iniquity or the sin, but we do read that it caused physical sickness (verse 3-11), which led his friends to desert him (verse 11). David’s description should not be read as a medical diagnostic, as some commentaries do. This is, after all poetry, not a medical textbook.

God’s chastisement

David describes how God is drawing him back to Himself. God’s ‘*arrows*’ are His judgements (Deuteronomy 32:23; Psalm 7:12) which inflict the wounds that manifest in sickness (Job 6:4; Lamentations 3:12-13). God’s *hand pressed down* is because of the weightiness of sin (Psalm 32:4; 39:10) and this caused his vitality to be drained away.

The Talmud has a non-Biblical tradition that David was struck with leprosy by God after he had sinned with Bathsheba for a period of six months. Bavli Yoma 22b
[<https://www.sefaria.org/Yoma.22b.14>]

- David ... “was punished personally, in his own body, for that sin, as Rav Yehuda [b. Yechezkel] said that Rav [Abba Arikha] said: David was stricken with leprosy for six months after that incident, and the Sanhedrin withdrew from him in protest over his behaviour, and the Divine Presence also left him.”

David gives reasons why God is chastening him:

1. אִוְלָתָא (*iv'velet*) folly (verse 5): “when my foot slips” (verse 16) is an indication that David was no longer on solid ground, he had moved off on to the dark and slippery path himself. It is a poetic way to describe falling into sin (Psalm 94:18).
2. חַטָּאת (*chattat*) sin (verses 3 and 18): anything that is going against the will of God, knowingly or unknowingly.
3. עֲוֹנוֹת (*a'von*) iniquities (verses 4 and 18): when we become aware of sin, and yet we continue, and thereby intentionally disobey. This is called transgression, and if we continue on that sinful path, it becomes a premeditated choice, which is then iniquity.

David asks for a many-fold mercy:

It is interesting to note that the first and last thing David did was to appeal to God's mercy, not confession, nor regrettings of sin, but an appeal for *chesed* - lovingkindness. We see this Scriptural pattern also in Psalms 25 and 51. Even in the Brit Chadashah (the New Covenant) when Yeshua teaches His disciples to pray (Luke 11:2-4), He starts with *Kiddush HaShem*, the Sanctifying of God's Name, prayers about the Kingdom, then a request for grace (give us today...) and all of this is before the forgiveness of our sins.

The many-fold appeal to mercy

1. *O Lord rebuke me not in Your wrath* (verse 1)
2. *Chasten me not in Your burning anger* (verse 1)
3. *You will answer, O Lord my God* (verse 15)
4. *Do not forsake me, O Lord* (verse 21)
5. *O my God do not be far from me!* (verse 21)
6. *Make haste to help me O Lord, my salvation!* (verse 22)

This Psalm is divided into three strophes or stanzas, verses 1-8, 9-14 and 15-22.

Verses 1-8 LORD, rebuke me not in Your wrath.

- ¹ A Psalm of David, to bring to remembrance. O Lord, rebuke me not in Your wrath, And chasten me not in Your burning anger. ² For Your arrows have sunk deep into me, And Your hand has pressed down on me. 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 are gone over my head; As a heavy burden they weigh too much for me. ⁵ My wounds grow foul *and* fester Because of my folly. ⁶ I am bent over and greatly bowed down; I go mourning all day long. ⁷ For my loins are filled with burning, And there is no soundness in my flesh. ⁸ I am benumbed and badly crushed; I groan because of the agitation of my heart.

In the opening verse David appeals to God's mercy, he knows he has committed wickedness and he throws himself upon God's grace. Reading the verses that follow is painful, as David describes his sickness, the result of his folly, and how he is racked all over with pain. He is burning up with fever and his wounds are festering. Indeed there is no soundness in his flesh. Yet the worst description is that God has shot him with arrows, that is, God has made him sick and God's hand pressed down heavily upon him, so much so that he felt his life might come to an end.

Verses 9-14 Lord, all my desire is before You.

- ⁹ **Lord**, all my desire is before You; And my sighing is not hidden from You. ¹⁰ My heart throbs, my strength fails me; And the light of my eyes, even that has gone from me. ¹¹ My loved ones and my friends stand aloof from my plague; And my kinsmen stand afar off. ¹² Those who seek my life lay snares *for me*; And those who seek to injure me have threatened destruction, And they devise treachery all day long. ¹³ But I, like a deaf man, do not hear; And *I am* like a mute man who does not open his mouth. ¹⁴ Yes, I am like a man who does not hear, And in whose mouth are no arguments.

In verses 11&12, David describes that he is all alone; loved ones, friends and even family have removed themselves from his presence. Was it a form of leprosy? Unlikely, as the word נגף (*nega*), which is translated "plague" can carry that meaning (Leviticus 13:3), but it can also

mean a *stroke* “regarded as sent by a divine chastisement.”¹ On that basis, everyone kept their distance from him. “Loved ones” and “friends” indicates an affection and so we see the pain as they deserted him. The same thing happened to Job (Job 19:13). We should not be like that, and Messiah even promises a reward for those who visit the sick (Matthew 25:31-46). When we do visit those who are unwell and in pain, we should not be like Job’s comforters, but just be with them, listen to them and pray for them.

David continues that only those who seek his life want to be nearby. What is he to do? David knew what to do, he had revealed it in Psalm 37, namely *to trust in the LORD and wait for His deliverance*. This is not easy. With the voice of the Lord being silent, he felt *as a deaf man*. David had no arguments for his behaviour, except for the appeal to mercy (verse 1) and his declaration of hope (verse 15), and his prayer “be not far off God of my salvation.”

Verses 15-22 For I hope in You, O LORD.

- ¹⁵ But I hope in You, **O Lord**; You will answer, O Lord my God. ¹⁶ For I said, “May they not rejoice over me, *Who*, when my foot slips, would magnify themselves against me.” ¹⁷ For I am ready to fall, And my sorrow is continually before me. ¹⁸ For I confess my iniquity; I am full of anxiety because of my sin. ¹⁹ But my enemies are vigorous *and* strong, And many are those who hate me wrongfully. ²⁰ And those who repay evil for good, They oppose me, because I follow what is good. ²¹ Do not forsake me, O Lord; O my God, do not be far from me! ²² Make haste to help me, O Lord, my salvation!

David turns away from navel gazing, and turns his eyes on the LORD. *I hope* (literally, *I wait*) is an expression of trust. I wait for you in the hope that you will answer. Waiting is hard, we live in an instant age, with instant coffee giving an instant fix, and instant gratification. Not so with God. Waiting makes us rely on the LORD, waiting makes us grow in our trust in the LORD, for it is then that He can change us and strengthen us to do His will (Isaiah 40:30-31).

We cannot always be on the mountain top and see the plans He has for us. As we walk with Him, there will be valleys (Psalm 23:4) and tough times, even disappointments, as we read here in this psalm. It is ok to ask why am I here? And why is this happening to me? Yes, we must allow God to speak in our pain and frustrations too. Sufferings and periods of waiting will produce in us perseverance, character and hope (Romans 5:3-5). There is no instant character development for the believer with God. We need to be like David, faithful in waiting on the LORD, confessing iniquity and expressing sorrow over our sins, doing what is right. And we can make our plea to the LORD, for He will never forsake you (Hebrews 13:5), even though it may feel like it.

When David finished this prayer there was no instant deliverance, but he does ask the Lord to make haste. Like David, we pray “Lord be near to us, especially when we are in pain and make haste, O Lord, to our salvation.”

Selah
Blessings in Messiah
Paul & Sue

¹ See נָזַף in the Abridged Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew-English Lexicon of the Old Testament, 1906.