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A Proper Response to God's Correction

Psalm 38

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Let's imagine that you went into a restaurant and you ordered your food. What you didn't know was there was someone in the kitchen that wanted you dead. So this person poisons your food. You don't know that, but I happen to be in the kitchen and I see it. I know that if you consume that food you will die. Do you believe that I have a moral obligation to say something? Or would it be morally permissible for me just to stand by and watch while you eat that poisoned food and you perish?

I think we would all say that that is not morally appropriate to sit by and watch if I know that's true. I would intervene. I would come to you and say, "Somebody poisoned your food." (Some of you are thinking: I've been to that restaurant. I've been to that country.") And if you persist in eating, I probably would get more intense with my warning. And if I had to, I'd probably physically remove that food from you, lest you perish.

Certainly the same thing is true in the spiritual realm. We throughout life order from the "menu of life" that which seems to be good, that's going to satisfy our hunger, but we do have an enemy that's very tricky and he's prone to poisoning our food. It looks like it will satisfy. It smells good. But it actually is full of poison. There is one who always knows that, and that's God. God doesn't sit passively by and just watch us destroy ourselves. He intervenes. He tells us; He warns us. The Bible is full of warning that there's poison in some of the "food" and we need to beware. Sometimes we don't listen to that, so He's given us His Holy Spirit, who also convicts us and warns us when we're about to consume that which will destroy us. Sometimes we're very stubborn and we don't listen to that either. We just keep eating.

Because God loves us, He is committed to doing whatever is necessary to stop us. Why - because He wants to punish us? No. Why? Because He's a control freak? No. The answer is what we've just been singing about it—because He is good. He is good to me and He loves me and He knows I'm eating poison and He will stop me.

We call this the discipline of God—when God intervenes and does what He has to do to get our attention before we self-destruct. That raises certain questions. When does He do that? How does He do that and how do we know? How should we respond?

I think we can answer those questions from Psalm 38. Psalm 38 is a psalm of David and it is like reading his own personal diary or his own journal. It tells his own story of his struggle with his physical disease that is from God in order to get his attention, because he was destroying himself. And God had to do this to get him to stop and to listen. Verse 1 begins:

O LORD, rebuke me not in Your wrath, And chasten me not in Your burning anger.

(*NASB)

One of the things that is helpful in this psalm is that we get a good glimpse into the heart of a person who is truly repentant. Sometimes we don't know if people really are repentant or not. They seem to be sorry, but you can't really tell that they really mean it. This psalm helps us with some things we can look at to help assess that. It starts in verse 1 with David making a very clear statement that he understands his sin is offensive to God. It angers God. As a matter of fact, his terminology is very strong. God has a "burning anger" towards David's sin. Sometimes we have a tendency to kind of dismiss or downplay our sin, as if it's not all that offensive to God—that it's not

that big of a deal. We sometimes just casually address it. One of the marks of someone who is truly repentant is they understand the seriousness of sin against God. It angers God. It's God's burning wrath. What David is actually saying is that he knows what he deserves. He's asking for mercy. He's offended God.

For Your arrows have sunk deep into me... (v. 2a)

Now later we know in the psalm that what David is struggling is a physical illness. Perhaps this is borrowing an imagery from the Canaanites. They had a god who was the god of the archers. He was also the god of disease and plagues. Perhaps David is borrowing that imagery to say God has taken this arrow of disease, and He has penetrated his heart with it. He doesn't say it's a flesh wound. He says it's a deep wound: "Your arrows have sunk deep into me..."

And Your hand has pressed down on me. (v. 2b)

That's an imagery where God, in a sense, has just pinned David to the carpet until he's willing to listen. It's the idea that God went to David when he was starting to consume the poison and warned him. But David wouldn't listen; he kept eating. He warned him again, and he wouldn't listen. So finally God has pinned him to the floor and He's going to hold him there until he comes to his senses. It's like a child throwing this fit, who's out of control, and you just pin them to the floor until they are finally under control.

There is no soundness in my flesh because of Your indignation; There is no health in my bones because of my sin. For my iniquities are gone over my head; As a heavy burden they weigh too much for me. My wounds grow foul and fester because of my folly. (v. 3-5)

Now verses 3, 4, and 5 are very important to understand. One of the questions that would arise out of this psalm would be: Is physical illness always a part of God's discipline? There are those who preach a message of health, wealth, and prosperity—that if you believe and have faith and walk with God, you will never be sick. Therefore, illness is always a mark of either a lack of faith or God's discipline. But the reality is, that is not true. It is not true. The fact is we live in a sin-cursed world, and because of that, there is suffering and disease. And disease reigns on the righteous and the unrighteous alike. As a matter of fact, I would say the overwhelming majority of the time, sickness and illness and disease are not a part of God's discipline. They are simply symptoms of living on a sin-cursed earth.

But there are those rare occasions when physical illness may be God's hand of discipline. It's talked about in the New Testament as well as the Old Testament. If you wish to study more on this subject, I recommend a tape from our study on the book of James in order to get a New Testament text for this. (James 5:12-20, tape #2996, available from the Tape Window.) I think the reality is, there are those occasions when God does use physical illness as a tool in His toolbox to stop us from consuming the poison.

Then that raises the question: How do I know? When we are struggling with a disease, with a physical illness, we don't really need the added emotional turmoil of trying to figure out if this is God's discipline or not. Sometimes people get so worked up over that. You know, they suddenly find out they have this disease and they're wondering, *Where did I go wrong? Is God trying to punish me? Have I sinned? I remember back 10 years ago, I did such and such, and now God's finally punishing me for that.*

That's not the psalm at all. There's no where in the psalm where David starts to search, "Oh, God, have I sinned? Have I made a mistake? Is there somewhere in my life where I've failed, and that's why you're doing this?" As a matter of fact, it's just the opposite. He knows exactly what's going on here. He knows exactly what's he done. He knows why God is doing this. That's what he says in verse 3: "...because of my sin." He's not guessing. He's not trying to figure out. He knows.

For my iniquities [we might use the word "guilt"] are gone over my head; As a heavy burden they weigh too much for me. (v. 4)

He says, "I'm drowning in my own guilt." His guilt is a burden, and it weighs too much for him.

In verse 5 he says it's because of his folly. That word "folly" is a very important word. It's a word that means foolishness, but it's really more than that. It's used often in the Proverbs, and it's used to describe willful, intentional sin—premeditated sin. This isn't a case of somebody one day who was tempted and was weak and gave into it, then repented and confessed. This is talking about someone who knew it was wrong and very willfully and intentionally chose that way of sin, and probably as a pattern—as a way of life. That's this idea of folly. God came along and said to David, "That food is poisoned." And David ignored him. And God said again, "That food is poisoned." David knew that, and he just kept willfully choosing to consume it.

In our language today the word "folly" might mean sheer stupidity. That's really what it means. David is looking back and he's saying, "You know, it was absolutely stupid. God told me it was poisonous; I knew it was. But I did it anyway." That's folly. When you are under the hand of God's discipline, you know it. You don't have to guess. You don't have to try and figure it out. You don't have to go back into your last months and try to figure out what you could have done. You know exactly why God is doing this. That's the attitude of the psalmist. He's not guessing. He knows that. And God has pinned him to the carpet to get him to stop.

I am bent over and greatly bowed down [we would say, I am greatly in pain]; I go mourning all day long. For my loins are filled with burning, And there is no soundness in my flesh. I am benumbed and badly crushed; I groan because of the agitation of my heart. (v. 6-8)

David's in a bad way here, which makes verse 9 a very interesting verse:

Lord, all my desire is before You; And my sighing is not hidden from You. (v. 9)

We might expect at this point that David would be angry at God or bitter at God or feel separated from God. But it's just the opposite. He has been away from God in his sin, but now God has refocused David's attention. He's actually feeling a great intimacy with God. His heart is now very responsive to God. Like a child who's been properly disciplined, he now realizes God has done this for his own good. And his heart is very responsive to what God is doing.

My heart throbs, my strength fails me; And the light of my eyes, even that has gone from me. (v. 10)

We talked about the fact that the Hebrew people saw light in the eyes. What he's saying is, "I'm dying. The light's going out."

My loved ones and my friends stand aloof from my plague; And my kinsmen stand afar off. (v. 11)

In the ancient near East, the people believed that if you were diseased, it was probably because the gods were mad at you. Even the Hebrew people, by and large, believed it was because of God's judgment. Often when someone was diseased, they just stayed away. They didn't want to make God mad at them. They didn't want a piece of this. So, often the person would suffer in isolation.

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. (v. 12)

David is probably king at this time, and his enemies, both within his kingdom and without, hear of his illness and they see him as being vulnerable. And they're going to take advantage of it. There are probably a lot of rumors, a lot of gossip, and just a lot of stuff going on about David. So he responds in verse 13:

But I, like a deaf man, do not hear; And I am like a mute man who does not open his mouth. Yes, I am like a man who does not hear. And in whose mouth are no arguments. (v. 13-14)

Sometimes when people are sorry for their sin, they're sorry that they got caught, they're sorry they're in a mess, and they're sorry that they did that. But they aren't truly repentant. They aren't truly broken. They become defensive. And often there's talk and gossip that reflect things that aren't necessarily true, and people become defensive. They say, "Well, I didn't do that, and I didn't do that, and that's not true." They try to defend themselves.

But one who's truly broken doesn't really go down that path. And that's what David is saying. He's saying, "I'm like a deaf man; I just don't hear them. I don't care what they say." His focus is really not on them; it's on God. It's not on defending himself; he's guilty. That's why he says, "I'm mute. I have no argument. I may not have done everything they're saying, but what difference does it make? I'm guilty. So rather than being defensive, he's broken. He says, "I don't care what they say. I'm not going to try and defend myself." What does he do?

For I hope in You, O LORD; You will answer, O Lord my God. (v. 15)

His eyes are riveted on God as his only hope. As a matter of fact, the Hebrew word for "hope" could be translated "wait"—"I wait on You, O Lord." David is just saying, "God, I don't care what they're saying; I'm not going to try and defend myself. I'm just waiting on You." And he commits all of this to God.

For I said, "May they not rejoice over me, who, when my foot slips, would magnify themselves against me." (v. 16)

In other words, he's just crying out to God to deal with this—his enemies that want to magnify themselves through his sin. And he's letting God take care of it. What is he dealing with? Well, he's not dealing with them. He's not trying to defend himself. He says:

For I am ready to fall, And my sorrow is continually before me. For I confess my iniquity; I am full of anxiety because of my sin. (v. 17)

David's focus is on himself and the guilt of his sin—what he's done. He says, "I confess my iniquity." That word "confess" is a very important term. It means to agree with. It's very important when we're addressing this whole issue of sin, because sometimes we can be sorry, but that isn't necessarily the same as confession. I like to use the actual language of confession

when I address my own sin. I find it helps me be more honest with God. I don't know if you're like me at all, but sometimes when I'm addressing an area of my life, I tend to tiptoe around it and not really get to the point. "God, I'm really sorry if I've offended so and so...I'm not sure it was even my fault, but they seem to think it was. You know, just possibly, if by any chance, maybe, sort of, I kind of..." I'm just tap dancing around the thing, and God's up there just waiting for me to get to the point.

If I use the language of confession, I say, "God, I agree with You. What I did was sin, and sin is offensive to You, therefore I agree with that. I confess that." Now, what's implied in confession is I understand—I agree with God that it's offensive—therefore, I will stop. I can be sorry for my sin and sorry for these consequences and *sorry* for all that's going on, but still find myself doing it again tomorrow. And then I'm really *sorry*; and then I do it the next day. Confession is different than that. Confession really gets to the point: "God, this offends You"—which implies it must stop. It cannot just continue day after day, and that's what he says. He is confessing his iniquities, full of anxiety, because of his sin.

But my enemies are vigorous and strong, And many are those who hate me wrongfully. And those who repay evil for good, They oppose me, because I follow what is good. (v. 20)

Now, it's true, this is a psalm about David's sin. But by and large, over his life David pursued that which was good. He was a man after God's own heart. And because of that, his enemies hated him. They hated him wrongfully—they hated him because he pursued good. So David is saying, "These people aren't angry with me because I've sinned. They aren't angry with me because I've offended God. They just hate good. And he's simply saying, "God, don't let them triumph. Don't let them succeed" because of his struggle.

Finally, verse 21:

Do not forsake me, O LORD; O my God, do not be far from me! Make haste to help me, O Lord, my salvation! (v. 21-22)

David understands that ultimately the only solution is God. His eyes are focused on God, and he calls out, and he waits for God to deliver him—to be his salvation. If David would have had that attitude earlier, Psalm 38 would not have been necessary. But he didn't. Whenever we sin, what we're really saying is, "God, I don't trust You. I don't think You can meet the needs in my life. I don't think You can deliver the goods. So I'm going to take it upon myself and do it myself."

God continually says, "You know, that's poison." And we say, "Well, I don't know. It doesn't look poison, and it doesn't really smell poison, and I'm really hungry. I think I'm going to try it." So the Holy Spirit says, "That is poison." And we just keep eating, thinking somehow it won't make *us* sick.

Now, God can either stand back and let us eat until we perish, or He can pin us to the carpet and say, "I'm going to hold you here until you listen to Me, or you're going to kill yourself." And that's what He does.

I read through this psalm and I find myself thinking, *I don't want this to be my story. I don't want God to strike me with some disease and pin me to the carpet and go through all that suffering. I don't want to experience that.* And God responds very simply by saying, "OK, then deal with your sin." Nothing in the psalm was necessary if David would have dealt with his sin—if he would have

stopped eating the poison when God said, “That’s poison.” But he just kept eating and eating, and finally, God had to stop him.

Some of you have never dealt with your sin. David is very clear in the psalm that the only hope of salvation is God Himself. The God of Psalm 38 is the same God who, at a point in time, became flesh and blood. Jesus Christ walked this earth and ultimately was nailed to a cross in payment for your sin...in payment for my sin. All of us are sinners. There are not enough religious works, religious hoops, that we could ever do to make our sin go away. You can’t get the good to outweigh the bad—it just doesn’t work that way. The only hope of salvation is to believe: Yes, Jesus did that for me. And I believe that; I embrace that; I make it my own. I trust that as the source of my salvation. When you do that by faith, God promises He will forgive your sin, and He Himself, through His Spirit, will come into your life and dwell within you and begin to mold and shape you and make you like Jesus.

For some of you, that’s the step you need to take. It might be the first time you’ve ever really dealt with your sin before God. My guess is that the overwhelming majority of us have already made that decision. But the reality is, some of you recognize you need to deal with your sin. As a matter of fact, as soon as I say that, you know immediately what it is. You don’t have to search for it, you don’t have to look for it—it’s there. You’ve tried to excuse it; you’ve tried to rationalize it; you’ve tried to ignore it. But the fact is, as soon as I say that, you know exactly what it is. And God is saying to you, “That’s poison.” You have an opportunity today to stop eating it, but you need to recognize, if you choose not to, then God will stop you. He will do what He has to do. He’ll pin you to the carpet to get you to stop. Why? Because He wants to punish you? No. Why? Because He’s a control freak? No. Because He’s good. Because He loves you. He knows that’s poison and He knows that if you don’t stop you will self-destruct. So He will stop you.

It seems like an appropriate way to end to take some time to think about this and process this. For some of you, this is the time to choose to trust Jesus as your Savior—to deal with your sin. For others, you just need to do business with God. You’ve been involved in something that you know is offensive. And God gives you an opportunity to confess that and deal with that. And a part of that is saying, “It has to stop. I can’t keep doing it.”

*Scripture quotations are from the NASB (New American Standard) translation.