

Psalm 38

Turmoil is Part and Parcel of Authentic Christian Living

1. Introduction

“This agonizing cry (the third of the ‘penitential psalms’...) shares with Psalm 70 the title ‘To bring to remembrance’. Since with God to remember is to act, this word speaks of laying before Him a situation that cries out for His help” (Kidner).

2. Structure

The Psalm could be divided into vv. 1-10 (God’s apparent hostility towards David because of his sin resulting in physical suffering) and vv. 11-22 (social hostility towards David, taking advantage of his physical suffering). Two more elaborate structures are suggested:

(a) Cyclic structure

Verse 12 is taken as the counterpoint to v. 2 and vv. 22-23 – not only the LORD, but also David’s friends stand at a distance from him.

A¹ (v. 1) *Plea – LORD, don’t be indignant with me!*

B¹ (vv. 2-5) *My sin, and the LORD’s indignation*

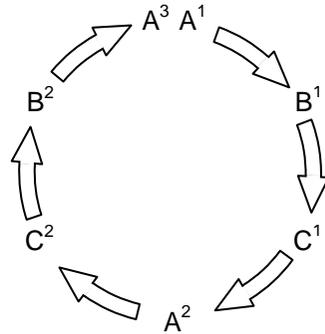
C¹ (vv. 6-10) *My sickness, and my confidence in the LORD*

A² (v. 11) *Plaint – my friends stand off from me!*

C² (vv. 12-16) *The enemies’ opposition, and my confidence in the LORD*

B² (vv. 17-20) *My sin, and the enemies’ hostility*

A³ (vv. 21-22) *Plea – LORD, don’t stand off from me!*



(d) Pendulum structure, observing rhythm of plea and complaint

A¹ (v. 1) *Plea – LORD, don’t be indignant with me!*

B¹ (vv. 2-8) *Suffering in my body because of my sin*

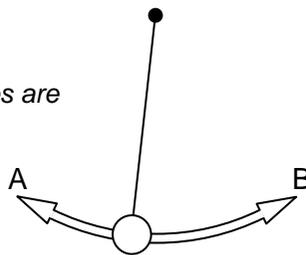
A² (v. 9) *Plea – Lord, all my desire is before you!*

B² (vv. 10-14) *Suffering because friends are absent, foes are present*

A³ (v. 15) *Plea – LORD, I am waiting for you to answer!*

B³ (vv. 16-20) *Suffering because I am weak and my foes are strong*

A⁴ (vv. 21-22) *Plea – LORD, don’t stand at a distance from me!*



3. Outline

(a) Multiple layers of suffering

- Physical pain: no soundness in his flesh; no well-being in his bones; stinking wounds; burning in his loins; palpitations; pain all the time.
- Social isolation: “Those who love me, and my friends, stand off from my plague; and those who are nearest to me have stood at a distance.”
- Cruel opposition: a whispering campaign; false accusations; malevolence.
- Loss of assurance: Is God exploiting David’s suffering like his adversaries (vv. 1-2, c.f. vv. 17-20); is God stand-offish as David’s friends (v. 21, cf. v. 11)?

(b) Painful awareness of sin

“The many psalms that protest because suffering comes undeserved warn us against reckoning that [sin and suffering] are always linked; Ps. 38 and other psalms warn us against denying that there is ever a link” (Goldingay).

- Sin cuts deep: God’s arrows penetrate David (v. 2); flesh and bones (v. 3) are the very substance of humanity.
- Sin as a burden (v. 4b); he has severe back pain (v. 7); he has lost his strength (v. 10); God’s hand presses down heavily (v. 2).
- Sins overwhelms (v. 4a); he knows turmoil of heart (v. 8) and anguish (v. 18); his senses are numbed (vv. 10b, 13); he is unable to speak (vv. 13-14).

(c) Dogged trust in God

David feels numb and crushed; he is ready to stumble; his pain is continuous – but he confesses dogged trust in God (vv. 9, 15). Remarkable! David feels that God’s arrows have penetrated in to him. He feels that the hand of God pressing down heavily on to him. But he still sets his longing out before this God.

“Wait in hope” (v. 15) is same word used by Job (Job 13:15). In other words, the trust expressed by David is “in for the long haul”.

(d) Cyclic pleas for help

This last point is illustrated by the “shape” of the Psalm (see diagrams overleaf). It isn’t linear, i.e. it doesn’t pass through turmoil to resolution. Instead, it goes round in circles, or it swings back and forth like a pendulum. David keeps switching between his prayer for God’s help and his complaint about his suffering.

This is a warning against a simplistic understanding of the Christian life as simply “upwards and onwards”. Instead, there are many valleys, reverses, and dark nights in which all we can manage is to cry, “Do not forsake me, O LORD; my God do not be far off from me. Make haste for my help, O Lord, my salvation.” The underlined words suggest we might feel that God is far off and dragging his heels!