

The Path of Confession

Psalm 38

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At this time, I want to invite our children who are four years old to 1st grade to be excused to their time of children's church as one of our children's church leaders will be there to greet you in the foyer as they prepare for their time.

And indeed, as we've just sung and heard sung, it is all about Jesus. Although this Psalm is not a prophetic Psalm or one that prophecies about the coming of the Christ, Jesus is still present. Although David is not appealing to Him, we as the church of Jesus Christ look back to the Psalms to learn the path of confession. David looked to the Lord as we look to the Lord. David looked to the God of mercy as we look to the God of mercy. David looked to the God of grace as we do. And so, it teaches us how to use the Psalms. The Psalms are not for that time. They are for now. For it teaches us how to humble ourselves before God and how David and how the Bible itself views the nature of sin and views confession and the central role of it for those who are followers of the Lord.

Psalm 38 is made up of what is called the penitential Psalms, or the Psalms of confession. They include the following, Psalm 6, Psalm 32, this Psalm 38, Psalm 51, Psalm 102, Psalm 130, and Psalm 143. That isn't to suggest that other Psalms do not have confession within them. It's that these Psalms overwhelmingly have as their theme confession of sin to God. And so, I encourage you to go back to just read some of these, 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143. Today is an introduction to the confessional Psalms. Next week, Pastor PD will lead us through a specific Psalm of confession, Psalm 51.

But this Psalm gives us not only some degree of understanding of confessional Psalms in general, but some specifics even about why and how David goes about confessing his sin. Hear now, Psalm 38, the word of God.

O Lord, rebuke me not in your anger, nor discipline me in your wrath! For your arrows have sunk into me, and your hand has come down on me. 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 have gone over my head; like a heavy burden, they are too heavy for me. My wounds stink and fester because of my foolishness, I am utterly bowed down and prostrate; all the day I go about mourning. For my sides are filled with burning, and there is no soundness in my flesh. I am feeble and crushed; I groan because of the tumult of my heart.

O Lord, all my longing is before you; my sighing is not hidden from you. My heart throbs; my strength fails me, and the light of my eyes—it also has gone from me. My friends and companions stand aloof from my plague, and my nearest kin stand far off. Those who seek my life lay their snares; those who seek my hurt speak of ruin and meditate treachery all day long. But I am like a deaf man; I do not hear, like a mute man who does not open his mouth. I have become like a man who does not hear, and in whose mouth are no rebukes.

But for you, O Lord, do I wait; it is you, O Lord my God, who will answer. For I said, "Only let them not rejoice over me, who boast against me when my foot slips!" For I am ready to fall, and my pain is ever before me. I confess my iniquity; I am sorry for my sin. But my foes are vigorous, they are mighty,

and many are those who hate me wrongfully. Those who render me evil for good accuse me because I follow after good. Do not forsake me, O Lord! O my God, be not far from me! Make haste to help me, O Lord, my salvation!
[ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Pray with me.

Now, Lord, we ask that you would set your word, the path of confession, like deep roots into our hearts. That it would not be a place that we visit once in a while, but that it would be a description of who we are as a people, a people who are ready to confess, who understand our need of confession because we come to a God who is merciful, loving. And with all heaven we can sing blessed be the Lamb who was slain. We thank you Lord because we come to you because you are a God of salvation, as did David. Teach us now and help the teacher. In Jesus's name. Amen.

So, as we look at this Psalm together, I want you to see that it has in it these three broad elements, an understanding of conviction, verses 1-2, the sinfulness of sin, verses 3-8, and then receive mercy, verses 9-22. So, understanding conviction, the sinfulness of sin, and receive mercy.

The understanding conviction itself, one of the things that the penitential Psalms bring out – in fact, this Psalm repeats what we hear earlier in the penitential Psalms of Psalm 6 and even Psalm 32 – we hear the way in which, first and foremost, David entrusts himself to the Lord because he understands where the conviction comes from. Notice the distinction. The sin comes from himself; it comes from his own heart. But the conviction for sin, understanding his guilt, comes from the Lord. And so, he begins by entrusting himself to the Lord by way of understanding conviction itself when he says this simple phrase, “O Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger.”

So, the understanding, first and foremost of conviction, is David entrusts himself and invites us to entrust ourselves to the Lord who is the Lord. He is the one who is his authority. He is the one who is over David. He is the one who is over us. He's the one who is over the nation of Israel as David was the king. And here, David teaches that first and foremost, the pathway to confession is going to the very one who we have offended. It's not to suggest that our sins are not committed against other particular people in particular ways, but all sin finds its origin in rebellion against God and who He is. And so, David begins this Psalm of confession by saying, “O Lord, rebuke me not in your anger.”

Now, that's just the way that David entrusts himself to the Lord here. Just a few chapters earlier in Psalm 32, he begins the Psalm this way.

Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.
Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity, in whose spirit there is no deceit. For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long, for day and night, your hand was heavy upon me. My strength was dried up by the heat of summer. I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover my iniquity. [ESV]

Here, we learn how David goes to the one who is the Lord, the one who can remove iniquity, the one who is righteous in bringing judgement, and it was the one who is the source of mercy. The path of conviction begins with entrusting ourselves as David entrusted himself to the Lord.

But also, he goes on in verse 2, “For your arrows have sunk into me, and your hand has come down on me.” Here, he's using the language as if the Lord is bringing judgement. In other words, the Lord in His love to David. And of course, that may seem foreign to us. But the scriptures tell us that the Lord disciplines those that He loves. And here, he's saying that the Lord has brought conviction and even disciplined him. And the weight that he feels is the conviction of the Lord's wrath at his sin. That is what David is experiencing. That's what's drawing him to conviction and to confession, that the Lord who is

righteous in His authority, who is holy in His character, who is all powerful in His nature is manifesting that power, that authority, and that righteousness, and that holiness and revealing it to David even in the midst of his sin.

Notice God is not far from us in our sin. He pursues us. And here, He pursues David. And David uses the language of arrows. What is he talking about? Does that mean that David literally has arrows? No. He's using this language to demonstrate to us that in the midst of his sin, when he recognizes this conviction, what he is experiencing is this straight-line relationship between him and a holy God. And he feels God's conviction.

What he's expressing there is something which we need to hold in tension which sometimes we can be convinced or deceived that those don't belong in the gospel. But they do. And I want to borrow the language of Richard Lovelace in his book *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, I don't know if there's a namesake connection. I only hope there is because he's really cool. The book is great. *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, written in the '80s, still very present. It's great.

So, here's what he says. "Two things which we must hold together, repentant faith." What he means by that is this. He says,

"Faith and repentance are not separable quantities. To have faith is to receive God's word as truth and rest upon it in dependent trust. To repent is to have a new mind toward God and oneself and Christ and the world, committing one's heart to new obedience to God."

Obviously, these two factors are so interwoven that they are experienced as one so that the condition of justification is not faith plus repentance, but repentant faith.

So, David is entrusting himself to the Lord who is the one who brings conviction and he now sees it for what it is. But he is also repenting and understanding that it is God who he has offended and is the one whom he needs to seek forgiveness and restoration. Repentant faith. It's not that he's justified, then he goes out and tries to demonstrate faith. No, they come together. David is going to the only one who can justify him. As the earlier Psalm says, he's going to the only one who can say to the one who confesses, "Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity, in whose spirit there is no deceit."

Here is the tricky part about the pathway of confession. There is no deceit in being vulnerable before a righteous and holy God in confessing sin. Deceit is coming before a holy God as if we have not sinned. Repentant faith brings both of these together, a God of holiness and goodness and love and mercy, and sinners who are broken in our hearts and our natures, and we come to Him for forgiveness. And when we do so, the Lord counts no iniquity against us.

This is hard for us to grasp, but it is one which we must continue to be faithful in upholding together. And it is one which we must do more than just assenting to a list of doctrines. You see, one of two things happens when we deal with sin and a holy God and the reality and the call to confession. Our temptation is to fall off on one side of the horse of the other. On the one side, we either think too little of God's holiness, or the other, we seek to run from God as if He does not forgive. We know He's holy. We're just not ready to confess our need of Him.

Again, Richard Lovelace says the following,

"Many have so light an apprehension of God's holiness, and they have the extent and guilt of their sin that consciously, they see little need for forgiveness. Although, below the surface of their lives, many are deeply guilt-ridden and insecure. Many others on the other hand have a theoretical commitment to this doctrine, but in their day to day existence, they rely only

on their sanctification for their justification meaning they are drawing on their assurance of acceptance with God from their sincerity, their performance, or their relative infrequency of conscious, willful disobedience. Few know enough to start each day with a thorough going stand upon Luther's platform, you are accepted, looking outward in faith, and claiming holy alien righteousness of Christ as the only ground for acceptance and relaxing in that quality of trust which will produce faith, love, and gratitude."

On the one hand, we can say God's not really that holy. And yet, many still live feeling insecure. And the only way they try to buck themselves up is to make themselves feel ashamed enough and guilty enough that maybe then they'll be obedient. On the other hand, there are those who know the holiness and righteousness of God, yet on a day to day basis, we think that we can find ourselves secure in His holiness and grace because, well, we're just trying really hard to be really good. And you know, I really don't do that much all that often. This is not an understanding of conviction. This is not the pathway of confession.

The pathway of confession says you are holy, you are righteous, and you are my authority, and you are perfectly right to be angry. And yet, in your mercy and your grace, you invite me to yourself. And there, I can repent. There, I can say, O Lord, my God, have mercy upon me for you are righteous. You are holy. And let me say, thanks be to God, that the hand of the authority of God in heaven by work of His Holy Spirit and His word together through the matchless power of the work of Jesus Christ Himself has been laid upon many of you any myself in this life that has kept us from grievous patterns of sin and has rescued us from the pit of hell itself.

That is the gospel. God is not angry over you will a club waiting for you to sin. Rather, He is a God of holiness and authority and righteous anger. But in Christ, He invites us as a Father of loving kindness full of grace. And He gives us the conviction to draw us to Himself, thanks be to God, to rescue us from insecurity, to rescue us from self-dependence, and to rescue us from sin and its utter sinfulness.

But this is where David goes. It's not just an understanding of a conviction that these Psalms of confession give us. He also goes deep into the sinfulness of sin. Notice he talks about in this Psalm the nature of how he understands sinfulness itself when he says in verse 3,

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 have gone over my head; like a heavy burden, they are too heavy for me. My wounds stink and fester because of my foolishness. [ESV]

Now, what's interesting about this is he doesn't give us here in this Psalm situational specificity meaning it was this sin on that date. That's not the point. He's talking about the condition of his heart, the condition of the human heart. And in so doing, what he's doing is he's recognizing that it is connected to us physiologically. That when we give ourselves to sin, it doesn't just mess us up mentally or, you know, this idea of spirituality that's somehow disconnected from our physical bodies. That if I give myself to drunkenness, it's going to have physiological effects. If you sleep with multiple people you are not married to, you're going to get a disease. You're going to get sick. You're going to experience physiological effects because sin isn't merely spiritual. It is a part of our being, our in fleshed being. And the reality is this, that he doesn't merely say that sin is discreet acts. It's a condition. It's our nature.

Let me give you a more modern example. This is a corporate confession of sin. I don't know if we've used it here. If we have, maybe it was once. But over the years, it's been one of my favorites. Notice the language. It says,

“Heavenly Father, we confess that we are satiated and bored. Creation has bored us. Work has bored us. Family has bored us. Friends have bored us. Our homes bore us. Television bores us. Redemption has bored us. Truth has bored us. You have bored us. Our generation has had so much to entertain it. We are jaded and cynical. We think the world is our servant, so we are not thankful when things go well for us, and we are not patient when they do not. We believe every desire should be satisfied so that we are not delighted when they are, and we are not humbled when they are not. We laugh, but we do not know joy. We are captivated, but we are never really awed. We celebrate, but we do not worship. Have mercy on us and forgive us. Amaze us with grace, bloodstained incarnate messianic grace, the glory of God in Christ. Amen.”

Davis understands what this corporate confession of sin is trying to get at. Sin is not merely actions. Sins of omission aren't merely failure to act in specific ways, but it is a condition of the heart. A lack of gratitude before God, taking His gifts for granted, and pride, all of which leads to actions, but find their home in the conditions of our hearts. We sin because we are fallen. We sin because we are fallen. We are not fallen because we sin. Do you see the difference?

The heart, we are first and foremost what we love. Sin comes from a desire of the heart, either pride or self-indulgence. Sin is not out there. As David says, “My wounds fester and stink.” It is our very nature.

What's interesting about David is he not only tells us that the sinfulness of sin is a condition of the heart, but confession is also a process. You see, in verse 3, he begins with, “There is no soundness in my flesh because of your indignation; there is no health in my bones because of my sin.” But then it progresses to verse 18 where it says, “I confess my iniquity; I am sorry for my sin.” Confession is often a process.

I don't know if you've ever found yourself in this place where you've gone to the Lord and you've confessed your sin, and perhaps you've even gone to the person whom you've sinned against and you confess and ask them for forgiveness. But then as the days, weeks, months, or even years go by, you might remember them. And maybe you remember them from a place, we hope, of greater maturity and you begin to think back on it again. It's not that you recommitted the sin, but you remembered again. And Lord, forgive me.

Now, as a pastor, you know I like words. I've always been a person who's very mouthy. Shocker. But next weekend, I go to visit my friends, who I haven't seen for a number of years, for our 30th high school reunion. And we'll drive through the area where I grew up and went to high school. Those streets hold very important stories for me. On the one hand, more of my time there was spent not knowing Christ and having a mouth that said things to this day that I am still ashamed of. And those streets hold the narrative and the stories of how I came to faith in Jesus Christ.

So, as I have thought about traveling back to South Carolina, which I have not been back to in 20 plus years, I go back with mixed feelings. I remember the things which I did. I remember the things that I said. I remember the hatred I had for others. I remember the broken relationship that I experienced with my parents for a long time. And in that process, I have found myself going back, Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner. Confession is a process. Now that I look back at it, thanks be to God, only by His Spirit have I matured one ounce. But as I look back, I see the foolishness of my sin. And I am appropriately ashamed, but I'm not shamed. I understand my guilt, but I see the beauty of His grace because it is not mere actions that we are sinners at our very core in need of forgiveness because the sinfulness of sin goes well beyond decisions or actions or inaction. It's a part of who we are.

But he doesn't leave us there. He leads us to see that we can receive mercy. And this is important, friends, because the confession that David gives and the confession that the gospel leads us to give in Jesus Christ avoids the following. It avoids self-loathing. David nor Paul nor any writer of the Bible hated themselves. Confession and seeking to acknowledge our sin before God is not hating ourselves or beating ourselves up and carrying around a weight of guilt. But it leads us to the very one who brought conviction is the very one who leads us to receive mercy.

Notice what he does in verse 15. He says, "But for you, O Lord, do I wait; it is you, O Lord my God, who will answer. For I said, 'Only let them not rejoice over me, who boast against me when my foot slips!'" You see, in the middle of this Psalm, David recognizes that the situation that he's in with his own heart and his own life situation is also finding himself being the victim of attacks from others who would seek to leverage this weakness of his to have victory over him. So, on the one hand, he's confessing his sin to God, and he's also asking God for vindication. But in so doing, he says, I will wait before the Lord.

David teaches us that the beginning of receiving mercy is when he says "wait," he means, I'm going to rest in the Lord because the Lord is the source of mercy. And I'm going to wait on Him. I'm going to find my rest in Him, not in my circumstances, not in myself, but in Him. And so, he's teaching us how to wait before God while at the same time asking God to vindicate him.

Now, while David doesn't utter the name of Jesus and while this is not a prophetic Psalm in and of itself, David does show us something here that telescopes just a little bit of something which we find in the Lord Himself, Jesus Christ. In the letter of 1 Peter chapter 2, Peter writes this.

For to this, you have been called because Christ also suffered for you leaving you an example so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return. When he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds, you have been healed. [ESV]

Amen! It gets better. "For you were straying like sheep but have now returned to the shepherd and overseers of your soul."

So, David goes before the Lord. He's entrusting himself just as he did at the beginning of the Psalm. He's entrusting himself again and he's waiting. He's going to entrust himself. Although he is the sinner, Christ, the better David, also went before us. Although He was without sin, He suffered on our behalf, took on our sin in His flesh, and died on the cross. And instead of seeking vindication, He entrusted Himself to the Lord who would bring righteous judgement. And by His wounds, we are healed which means we are welcomed by a loving Father through the savior Jesus Christ that we can go before Him in our sin, and we can wait and we can say, Lord, as the sinner says, Lord, forgive me for I am a sinner. Have mercy upon me. And in His mercy, we can wait because He is the source of mercy. He is the source of healing. He is the Lord.

And as David began this Psalm, "O Lord, rebuke me not in your anger," he ends it with this when he says, "Do not forsake me, O Lord! O my God, be not far from me! Make haste to help me." And he ends it with uttering a promise and a statement when he says, "O Lord, my salvation!" He's teaching us that both in confession and in receiving mercy, we do the same thing. Lord, in Christ, forgive me. Have mercy upon me. It is utterly casting ourselves upon the Lord because we're calling upon His promise. He is the Lord. He is our salvation. And I say it on good authority, that if the Lord does not hear the humble repentance and confession of His people, He is not God. He would be a liar.

But do you know what God's word promises me and you today? God's word promises us today the following wonderful words, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us." Because God is a God of authority, because God is a God of justice, because God is a God of anger and righteousness, He sent His Son to receive all of that justice and all of that anger for our sin upon Him. Therefore, we are free and invited to run headlong to the mercy seat of Christ. And there, as we confess our sins, He is righteous, and He is just upon the authority of His Son whom He has vindicated and raised from the dead victorious over sin and death. And He says to you, children, I love you and I forgive you. This is the song of the gospel.

Samuel Rutherford, a great Scottish preacher, said this, "There is no law music in heaven. There are all songs that say, 'Worthy is the lamb, and the blood of ransom has atoned for all sin.'" This is our song. This is why we can boldly come before the throne of grace. This is the path of confession.

Church of Jesus Christ, we can hold together a God who is holy and righteous who has given us His Son, calls us to confession that we might receive mercy and restoration and renewal. May He lead us to do so for His glory and through the name of Christ. Let's pray together.

Lord, we ask you, hear our prayers. Lord, hear our confession for there is no health in our bones apart from Christ. And yet, we cannot confess to you unless it is your kindness that leads us to repentance. For indeed, there is no law music. There is all, "Worthy is the lamb that was slain." And may the lamb who was slain on our behalf lead us to come to you in repentance for you desire to restore us, to renew us, to remove our sin from us as far as the east is from the west. And all our sin is forgiven in Christ. And yet, we, O Lord, are still called to come before you to humble ourselves and to seek and to appropriate the grace that has been promised and given. Pour out your grace on your people. And by your Holy Spirit, restore us from our foolishness and our sin. Strengthen us to walk in new ways of obedience, not as a proud people but as a people who recognize that unless Christ go before me, unless Christ is with me, unless Christ go behind me and your Spirit within us, we cannot know your grace. Help us, O Lord, that we might be a people renewed, forgiven, and changed forever. In Jesus's name we pray. Amen.