

Psalm Thirty-Eight

O LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger,
or 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;
they weigh like a burden too heavy for me.
My wounds grow foul and fester
because of my foolishness;
I am utterly bowed down and prostrate;
all day long I go around mourning.
For my loins are filled with burning,
and there is no soundness in my flesh.
I am utterly spent and crushed;
I groan because of the tumult of my heart.

O Lord, all my longing is known to you;
my sighing is not hidden from you.
My heart throbs, my strength fails me;
as for the light of my eyes—it also has gone from me.
My friends and companions stand aloof from my affliction,
and my neighbors stand far off.
Those who seek my life lay their snares;
those who seek to hurt me speak of ruin,
and meditate treachery all day long.

But I am like the deaf, I do not hear;
like the mute, who cannot speak.
Truly, I am like one who does not hear,
and in whose mouth is no retort.

But it is for you, O LORD, that I wait;
it is you, O Lord my God, who will answer.
For I pray, “Only do not let them rejoice over me,
those who boast against me when my foot slips.”
For I am ready to fall, and my pain is ever with me.
I confess my iniquity; I am sorry for my sin.
Those who are my foes without cause are mighty,
and many are those who hate me wrongfully.
Those who render me evil for good
are my adversaries because I follow after good.

Do not forsake me, O LORD;
O my God, do not be far from me; make haste to help me,
O Lord, my salvation.

On a number of occasions, while living in India, I spent time with people who had leprosy. The memories from those times have largely faded, but two images still come to mind.

The first is of one of the people I was traveling with – a student like myself. I recall her being highly anxious about the idea of interacting at close quarters with someone who suffered from this disease. Or perhaps it was her parents back home who were most concerned. I can't quite remember.

The second was my experience meeting someone with this condition for the first time – entering into a house, saying a man seated and smiling there. I can still picture him reaching out his hands, disfigured by repeated injuries that result from the nerve damage brought on by the infection.

Some have wondered if Psalm Thirty-Eight was written from the perspective of someone who had leprosy. Or at least something like it. You may know that when we read about leprosy and lepers in the Bible, it is not necessarily the same as our modern epidemiological category, but referred to any number of skin conditions.

There is, of course, no way to be sure, but there are a number of hints that lead us to wonder whether that might be the case. The writer describes, first in broad terms, then in graphic detail, the symptoms. “There is no soundness in my flesh ... my wounds grow foul and fester” (vv. 3, 5, 7).

Scholars note, in particular, the way in which the writer claims to have been ostracized, as result of his illness. “My friends and companions stand aloof from my affliction, and my neighbors stand far off” (v. 11). In the ancient world, people had primitive understandings of disease and infection. As result, people kept distance from those who had conditions like leprosy. They were considered ritually unclean and typically forced to live outside of the encampment (see Leviticus 14).

We can picture the writer there. And as we read on, we note that his prayers for healing are paired with prayers of confession. He sees his illness to be result of his iniquity and feels it necessary to seek God's forgiveness. “There is no health in my bones because of my sin” (vv. 3-5). For many of us, this connection will be uncomfortable.

The relationship between personal sin and physical suffering is a mystery, and one that countless have tried to understand. In India it has for centuries been tied to understandings of castes and past lives. If you come to be sick in this lifetime, it must be result of something that you did in a previous one.

Whether or not the psalmist accurately understands that dynamic or not, his prayer is one that many of us will be able relate to. In desperation, we will prayerfully grasp at any explanation that might make sense of our pain or provide us a way out of it.

As great as his need is for bodily and spiritual restoration, we would do well to remember the writer's desire to be reincorporated into community, and hold that at center. He wants not to be left alone. Despite advances in medicine and social practice, present-day leprosy patients continue to be marginalized in some cultures. Like them, the psalmist longs to be reconnected with his companions. He wants to no longer be isolated. He aches to be reunited with God (vv. 21-22).

In his commentary, James Waltner draws a parallel to the church's response to the HIV-AIDs crisis when it first began in the 20th century. Like leprosy, there was widespread misconception and fear about transmission. Discussion was continually derailed by those seeking to make determinations about God's judgment. People kept their distance. People were alienated. When what was really needed the whole time, Waltner argues, was friends "listen and care."

In the gospels, Jesus and his disciples encounter a man who is blind. His disciples ask him, "who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" "Neither," Jesus tells them, and then he heals the man (John 9:2). Rather than trying to pinpoint direct connections between human wrongdoing and human suffering, I believe we ought to follow his example in accompanying those who are suffering, and seeking healing on their behalf. – NS

For this reflection, I relied on James H. Waltner's commentary on the Psalms (Herald).