

PM Psalm 39 Everyone is but a breath!

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[0:01] Now we're going to read firstly in the book of Psalms in the Old Testament, the first part of the Bible. And the psalm we're going to read from is 39.

! Psalm 39.

The psalm begins with a heading in fact to the choir master, to Jedethon, a psalm of David. On the face of it, it might well be that Jedethon is the name of the choir master and it's acknowledged that it is a psalm of David.

Anyway, here is the psalm of David. I said I will guard my ways that I may not sin with my tongue. I will guard my mouth with a muzzle so long as the wicked are in my presence.

I was mute and silent. I held my peace to no avail and my distress grew worse. My heart became hot within me as I mused the fire burned.

[1:23] Then I spoke with my tongue. O Lord, make me to know my end. And what is the measure of my days?

Let me know how fleeting I am. Behold, you have made my days a few handbreadths. And my time is as nothing before you.

Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath seller. Surely a man goes about as a shadow.

Surely for nothing there in turmoil man heaps up wealth and does not know who will gather. And now O Lord, for what do I wait?

My hope is in you. Deliver me from all my transgressions. Do not make me the scorn of the fool. I am mute.

[2:20] I do not open my mouth for it is you who have done it. Remove your stroke from me. I am spent by the hostility of your hand.

When you discipline a man or a person with rebukes for sin, you consume like a moth what is dear to him.

Surely all mankind is a mere breath seller. Hear my prayer, O Lord, and give ear to my cry. Hold not your peace at my tears.

For I am a sojourner with you, a guest like all my fathers. Look away from me, that I may smile again, before I depart and am no more.

Amen. And may the Lord add his own blessing to the reading of his word. Let's unite our hearts once again in prayer. If you could turn with me then to Psalm 39.

[3:33] And just before we go into the Psalm, I'll maybe just read the verses I had planned to read from Romans 8, verse 31, where Paul says, What then shall we say to these things?

All the vicissitudes of life, all the blows, all the slings and arrows, as Shakespeare phrases it, that are fired at us. If God is for us, who can be against us?

He who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect?

It is God who justifies, who is to condemn. Christ Jesus is the one who died, more than that, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword, as it is written, for your sake we are being killed all day long, we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.

[4:53] No. In all these things, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Well, this is a psalm of David. And David, although he was a king, and although he no doubt had a lot of wealth, and a lot of power, and with that power, so many things that he could perhaps snap his finger and get this, that, and the next thing, nonetheless, was a human being.

And as a human being, he couldn't escape all the challenges of life. I think Jesus said, in the world you shall have trouble, but be overcome, be comforted, I have overcome the world.

I wonder if you ever feel God is treating you unfairly. Or, perhaps you feel his dealings with you are rather harsh and severe.

Well, you're not alone. Not only in this psalm, is that the kind of feeling that David has, but, we sang Psalm 13, and you, I'm sure you would have picked up the sentiments, certainly at the beginning of that psalm.

[6:57] We're going to look at David's situation, and we're going to, as we find it in this psalm, and we're going to look at it under three headings.

David's suffering in silence, and secondly, David's spiritual insight coming out of that cauldron of suffering, and thirdly, David's hope in the midst of suffering, because, it's interesting, this, this psalm 39, because right in the middle of the psalm, literally, from a literary point of view, right in the middle of the psalm, is the statement of hope.

So there's six verses before that, and six verses after it, so right in the epicenter of the psalm, is the hope. We might say a bit more about that later on.

David is clearly going through a difficult time. He says, for instance, at the end of verse 2, my distress grew worse.

My distress grew worse. It also says that, remove your stroke from me.

[8:42] That's quite direct language, isn't it? This is in verse 10. Remove your stroke, or another translation has it, your scourge.

What to pick up, whether it's scourge or stroke, is it's something severe. Remove your stroke from me. I am spent, I am done by the hostility of your hand.

Listen to the daringness of that language. The hostility of your hand. When you discipline a man with rebukes for sin, you consume him like a moth.

And then, incredibly, these words at the very end of the psalm, look away from me, Lord, that I may smile again before I depart and am no more.

Imagine how daring it can be in that psalm. And here is the thing, the book of psalms as a whole narrates the story of every believer in terms of the valleys and the mountaintops and everything in between.

[10:07] And we've got some of these valleys and mountaintops and so on in this psalm. Firstly, then, suffering in silence.

David's resolve to suffer in silence because he has a very good reason for this resolve, as we shall see. I said, verse 1, I will guard my ways that I may not sin with my tongue.

I will guard my mouth with a muzzle. Now, that's pretty radical. That's pretty, this is poetry of course, he's not putting a muzzle on him as you understand, we'll mention to you, the sansa poetry, I've mentioned that before, but it's time to get a point across.

My mouth is such a dangerous place, and my tongue is such a dangerous thing, that I need to guard my mouth with a muzzle.

Why, David? So long as the wicked are in my presence. Why David started off with a noble resolve is because he did not want to dishonor God with his lips in the presence of unbelievers.

[11:46] And I think this is an interesting application for us, that we need to be careful how we use our tongues, especially if we're going through a challenging time, in the presence of unbelievers.

It is, however, you know yourself, that I worked in Airdrie Health Centre, and I saw, it was like 500 people a year, presenting with bereavement and loss, not just bereavement and loss of a loved one, any loss, relationship issues, and other issues.

And one of the things that I used to say to people, it was called a listening service, because you wanted the people to do the talking, and you wanted to listen to really hear them, and often most of these patients would say, I even feel better having been listened to.

And the other reason that they felt better is they had taken some control of the storm of emotions that were going on inside by talking about them.

so that in a sense, in a general sense, it's unsurprising, certainly to me anyway, that this didn't work for David.

[13:27] Albeit, it was an honourable idea. I was mute and silent, he says, I held my peace, but listen to what he says, to no avail.

to no avail. Verse 3, my heart became hot within me as I mused, the fire burned.

His feelings and his thoughts and his emotions exploded. what comes first?

I wonder, eh? A wee bit of philosophy here, eh? The feeling or the thought? Does the thought come first and then the thought is expressed in an emotion?

Or does the emotion come first and then we think about that emotion? doesn't matter, they are intimately interconnected. Because we're psychosomatic people, people of body and spirit or body and soul.

[14:47] We're people who have emotions, we have an emotional life as well as an intellectual life. David says, I was mute and silent, I held my peace to no avail and my distress grew worse.

As I mused, the fire burned, then I spoke with my tongue. He gave up his policy, of suffering in silence.

Of course, you've got to be careful, haven't you? I mean, there's the great story of Job, isn't there? And there's his three friends who wanted to support him in his suffering.

And let me tell you something, at the very beginning they did the best thing to support him. You can read this in the book of Job, at the very beginning of the book of Job.

Here's what it says. When they first saw Job, they sat down beside him and never uttered a word for a whole week.

[16:10] Job, that was the best thing that they did. Because they were driven by their limited theology of sin and punishment, they were unable to hear Job.

Suffering in silence. It's not wrong, of course, if I say it was a noble thing for David.

And far as he was concerned, it came from his reverence for God and for God's honour. It's not wrong, of course, I don't believe, to share our thoughts and feelings with family and friends.

It can be very helpful. But David, you see, was fearful that he might blurt something out that would not be right in the presence of unbelievers and that was the reason that he decided to keep silent.

We too need to watch our tongue, as I've said, especially in the presence of unbelievers. Now, and neither do we want to, sometimes I wonder, this is only a wonder, and it might not apply to anybody here, sometimes I wonder if Christians, just generally, Christians, believers generally, maybe subconsciously, even unconsciously, they feel that they shouldn't demonstrate any of these emotions that we see littered in the book of Psalms.

[18:04] Look at that Psalm 13, for instance. how long, oh Lord, will you forget me forever? It's almost a sarcastic comment, isn't it?

How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I take counsel? Must I go through all that consternation in my mind? How long must I take counsel and have sorrow in my heart all day?

Answer me, Lord. our Father in Heaven is ready to hear us.

The best person to speak to is not David Parker at a listening service. It's the God who is our refuge and strength. I love the Psalms because of the raw reality and realism and I love the fact that it's an example that we can bring all our feelings to our Heavenly Father.

He knoweth our frame. He remembers that we are dust. Frail as summer's flower we flourish. Pop of wind and it is gone.

[19:29] And Jesus is familiar with our weakness and was tempted in all points like as we are.

And this is the glorious thing about Jesus Christ. I think I said it in my prayer. He walked all the talk. Here is one who was rejected.

Here is one who was hunted to be killed. Here is one who was disappointed with betrayal and his disciples in general.

Here is one who the mob turned against him and were allegedly for him. Here is one who was whipped. Here is one who was in a terrible consternation.

The very words that are used, believe me, the original Greek words that are used in these Gospels about Jesus' consternation in Gethsemane are very, very strong.

[20:29] He was agitated in a mega way. And he could say, Lord, if it's possible, take this cup away from me.

All his disciples forsook him and fled. Jesus Christ knows our weakness.

And Jesus Christ has masses of compassion for us in that weakness. suffering in silence. Yes, to some extent, but not in total silence. In silence because we want to honour God, that we do not say anything bad about God in the presence of unbelievers and dishonour him. But no, bring everything to God himself. He is well able to hear all that we are able to say to him.

[21 : 55] David breaks his silence, doesn't he, in verse four there. And he breaks it because I think what's going on here is whatever this is, we don't know what it was, but whatever the scourge or the stroke or the blow, and the NIV has it, he's overwhelmed with the blow that God has sent him.

Whatever it might be, it has given David an acute awareness of his frailness and his weakness and his fragility as a human being.

And that in itself, this is not a, Milton did his poem in Paradise Lost, and he says the *raison d'être* of this poem is to justify the ways of God towards men.

This is not me trying to justify suffering or go into it in any depth or anything like that, but nonetheless, he learned something in that cauldron that he may not have learned without that cauldron.

He says, make me know my end and what is the measure of my days let me know how fleeting I am.

[23 : 37] And you know, they say that most people, that used to be the stats, I don't know what they are now, but I remember reading this say four decades ago, that most people become Christians when they're young and exponentially the older they get, the less chance that they become Christians.

Christians. When you're young, you think you're invincible, you think you've got layers and layers of time.

David, whatever that God brought to him, and we'll see that he believes it was God that did it, whatever that was that God brought to him, he suddenly realises his vulnerability in his fragility, how tenuous is his existence.

Poor about us. We know not what a day might bring forth. That is why he says, make me know my end, and what is the measure of my days.

It might not be that he's basically saying, Lord, could you tell me the time of my death? It might just be more generally saying, help me to really know how brief and ephemeral and fleeting my life is.

[25 : 15] Is it not true, those of us who get older, we kind of look and think, where have all the years and the decades gone?

And I think we were singing a psalm there, our life is a tale that was told. Let me know, he says, let me really know, let me grasp this how fleeting I am.

behold, he says, you've made my days a few hand breaths. That was a measure, one of the shortest measures that was used at the time of the psalmist, a few hand breaths, just like the breadth of a hand, and four of those, and excluding the thumb.

And he says, it's so, you've made us so short, this life that we have. As somebody, Mary and I usually meet this lady who goes out walking as well, not with us, but we meet lots of walkers when we go out and walk, and quite a lot she'll say to us, my father used to say, this is not a rehearsal. She's right. And he says in verse 5, my lifetime is as nothing before you. Now, up till now, this whole psalm has been first person, singular.

[26 : 53] It's him, it's all about him, my, me, I. But he gets to the end of the verse 5, and through his own experience of suffering, and what that has brought out in terms of his fragility and fleeting brevity of life.

He says at the end of verse 5, surely all mankind stands as a mere breath. And he says in verse 6, surely a man goes about as a shadow.

Now, I looked up these words in the original language. I remember John L. Mackay, the professor of Old Testament in Hebrew in the Free Church College, he recommended the NIV in the Old Testament for us. He thought it was very, very good in the Old Testament. And one other way that the NIV characterises this statement in verse 6, surely a man goes about as a shadow, as phantom.

[28 : 19] And it's as if he's saying this life that we think is so real, I want to hold on to my life. it's nothing but a phantom. And he says, surely a man is speaking, he's almost engaging in a philosophical understanding of it now, rather than a personal.

Surely a man goes about as a shadow. Surely for nothing, they're in turmoil. there's a playwright who existed after the Second World War.

By the way, just as an aside, it's not in any of my notes or anything like that, that many thinkers believe that one of the great dents in Christianity among the nation was the two world wars in the 20th century.

anyway, after the Second World War, there was this Irish dramatist, novelist, and poet called Samuel Beckett.

[29 : 42] And he got involved in his work, in his expertise, in what he called the theatre of the absurd.

And one of his most famous plays is entitled Waiting for Godot, G-O-D-O-T.

And the reason I know about it, I studied it at university, because I did two years English as well.

Anyway, in the theatre, if you're going to watch that play, there's no choreography, there are no furniture or nothing, there is a blank stage with only two people talking gobbledygook to each other. And they're waiting for some friend called Godot, who never turns up. And what Beckett was saying is, if there's no God, we'll live a life of utter absurdity.

with no meaning, and no purpose, and no hope. The writer to the Hebrews puts it this way, doesn't he?

[31 : 29] Here have we no continuing city, but don't you, like me, love what comes after that, but we seek one to come. Here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come.

This meditation on how transient and ephemeral his life is, leads the psalmist to say something about the human pursuit of satisfaction.

And we've already covered that in many ways when we see that surely a man goes about as a shadow, surely for nothing, they're in turmoil, keeps up wealth, that's the end of verse 6, heaps up wealth and does not know who will gather it.

Absurdity. So many young people today, young couples, their life is frenetic, their life has no cella, pause in it, their life has no rest, and they're firing on all cylinders all the time, seeking to get this, that, and the next thing, for good reasons.

But man heaps up wealth and does not know who will gather.

[33 : 15] The thing is, do we wish to stay on that trajectory of the absurd, or would we not rather go on Jesus' highway, in order that we have a great hope for time and eternity.

And finally, David's hope in the midst of suffering and his renewed sense of his mortality and fragility and fleetingness.

as I say, bang in the middle just from a structural point of view, from a literary point of view, bang in the middle is verse 7.

And now, O Lord, for what do I wait? Do I just wait for all this absurdity and meaninglessness and emptiness and phantomness?

And now, O Lord, for what do I wait? My hope is in you. Glory to God. Glory to God.

[34 : 34] My hope is in you. Deliver me from all my transgressions. It's difficult to know there is he thinking, you know something, I'm realistic and I know I'm going to have transgressions in the future as well, I don't know.

Is he thinking about past, is he thinking about present, but I don't know, but I know this, he says all. In the great news, in the great news, he forgives us all our sins.

That's the great news. All our transgressions, all our iniquities, all our willful sins, all our ignorant sins, all our sins of neglect, things that we should have done and didn't do, and all our sins of doing things that we ought not to have done.

He forgives all your sins. Who is a pardoning God like you? Who has grace so rich and free? Psalm 130, Lord, from the depths I cry to you, but yet there is forgiveness with you that you may be feared. My hope, says the psalmist, is in you. And you know, it's quite interesting actually, because interestingly enough, I don't know why that is.

[35 : 59] No, I'm getting that wrong. He uses the word Lord in verse 4 in block capitals, but he doesn't use it in block capitals here.

And he goes back to block capitals just at the end of it, which we'll finish up with in a second or two, not literally. Yeah, so, and then he says, I am spent by, sorry, he says, no, this is what he says, verse 9, I am mute, I do not open my mouth, and there's, he started with being mute, he's followed by opening his mouth, and he's now saying, I am mute again, I do not open my mouth, I don't know

how you read that, but one way of perhaps reading it is that it's a reference to his silence earlier on, and tell you why I wonder if that might be the right understanding of it, it's the second line of verse 9, because it's you that did it, because it's you that did it, in other words, if some of these unbelievers came up and said, right, eyeball to eyeball, who was responsible for what this carry on that you're going through, through,

I am mute, I do not open my mouth, because it's you that did it, the inscrutable, mysterious, providence of God, that we will never be able to unravel, in its depths, when you discipline a person, remove your stroke from me, I am spent by the hostility of your hand, when you discipline a man, you consume him like a moth, all of this, all of this, is the psalmist saying to God, what you've done to me is so severe, I don't know if I told you, maybe I did, but it's worth telling again, maybe, our best man, when we got married in 1977, took motor neurons disease, and he was told by the consultant, he had five and a half years to live, and that's exactly how much I lived, and I used to go and see him quite regularly, and I remember him saying to me one day, he says, I know that God has a purpose, he says, but why on earth, he couldn't have accomplished his purpose in some other way, I don't know, basically, I think, one of the things that the psalmist is at least implying tacitly, why have you dealt with me so severe?

It's not even just that I'm suffering, it's the severity of it. I must finish, listen to his finish, hear my prayer, oh Lord, and give ear to my cry, hold not your peace from my tears, stiff, stiff off her lip, no way, open honesty before God, and this one is incredible, and Psalm 13, by the way, I just noticed it when we were singing it, and Psalm 13 is saying, we'll just get it, how long oh Lord, will you forget me forever, how long will you hide your face from me, and this

[40 : 25] Psalm is asking if God would hide it, because he thinks his face is so severe, look away from me, that I may smile again, this is pulling me down, I'm overcome by your blow, by the scourge, but you and I, don't we thank God, we know one, he didn't ask God to look away, he asked why God looked away, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me, he did that, that we might not have a life of absurdity, but a life of breathtaking and incalculable glory, is this

Saviour yours, Amen, and may the Lord bless his word to us for his own glory, and for our eternal good.