

Everyone is But a Breath!

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Preacher: David Parker

[0:00] I'm going to read now from the book of Psalms in the Old Testament, and I'm going to be reading! It's quite a remarkable psalm, Psalm 88, given that it doesn't really end on any kind of hope.

So it's quite distinctive in that sense. So I'll maybe break in to this Psalm 88 at verse 8. And here is what the psalmist is saying, and bear in mind he's saying all this before God. You have caused my companions to shun me. You have made me a horror to them. I am shut in so that I cannot escape. My eye grows dim through sorrow. Every day I call upon you, O Lord, I spread out my hands to you. Do you want wonders for the dead? Do the departed rise up to praise you, Selah? Is your steadfast love declared in the grave, or your faithfulness in Abaddon? Are your wonders known in the darkness, or your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness? But I, O Lord, cry to you. In the morning my prayer comes before you. O Lord, why do you cast my soul away? Why do you hide your face from me? Afflicted and close to death from my youth up? I suffer your terrors. I am helpless. Your wrath has swept over me. Your dreadful assaults destroy me. They surround me like a flood all day long.

They close in on me together. You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me. My companions have become darkness. Nobody can say that there isn't a raw reality in the Psalms. But the one that we're going to be looking at this evening is Psalm 39. So, let's now read that Psalm and we'll read the whole of that Psalm. Psalm 39, a Psalm of David to the choir master to Jedithon, probably a very well known choir master. And these are David's words in this Psalm. 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, in other words, my silence, to no avail.

[3:01] And my distress grew worse. My heart became hot within me as I mused the fire burned. Then I spoke with my tongue. O Lord, make me 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 handbreads, and my lifetime is as nothing before you. Surely, all mankind stands as a mere breath, Selah. 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. 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 with rebukes for sin. You consume like a moth. You consume like a moth what is dear to him. Surely, all mankind is a mere breath.

Selah. When you think of the Psalms, I want you to think of four things. Poetry.

The Psalms are structured in poetic form, and therefore, you're going to find metaphors. You're going to find images. You're going to find a non-prosaic language, if you like, non-historical language. I'm not saying you don't find it, but you're going to find these things, because all of the Psalms are in Hebrew parallelism poetry.

[5:28] When you think of the Psalms, think of prayers, because what you're reading in the Psalms is the prayers of the Psalmist at different points in his journey. No, one swallow does not make a summer, and because we might see Psalm 23 of David, where he's exuberating great confidence.

This is David as well. Sometimes preachers, they take something like a Psalm, and they, without saying it, they almost maybe give the impression, this is how we ought to be 100% all the time. Not only is it poetry, and is it prayers, but it's songs, it's praise. So, the Psalms are a praise manual. That is why we sing them, and they are absolutely rich, and they're deep, and they're broad, and

they have great height. And then, the Psalms are a picture, I'm going to put it this way to you, of a normal believer's journey through this life and through this world.

So, I want you to remember these four things about the Psalms. When I was at college doing my theology in Edinburgh, it was a man called Alastair I. MacLeod, who was the professor of apologetics.

Apologetics is not, as you know, apologizing for Christianity, but rather defending Christianity. But I'll never forget Alastair I saying this to me, not to me, to the whole class. Well, that included me. I was in the class. Yeah, and Alastair I said, one of the biggest problems for Christianity is the amount of suffering in this world that God has created. When I was at university, and I majored in philosophy, I got into a discussion with one of the professors of philosophy, and he actually brought that very criticism to me.

[8:01] For all the suffering in the history of the world, and all the suffering that's going to be, this is what he said to me, and all this eternal suffering that you're talking about, was it worth it?

For ten years, I wasn't in a charge, as they call it, a congregation. I've been in the ministry for thirty-one years, free church ministry that is. I've been a Christian for fifty-four, and I've been doing things before I come into the free church. But for ten years of that, thirty years, five of them were in Airdrie Health Centre, working with the GPs and the community mental health team, in roughly a kind of counselling role, with people being referred to me. But it was called the listening service. The other five years, I worked in Robin House for five years, Children's Hospice in Balloch. And I worked in York Hill Hospital, and the awards I was assigned to for three years, were Shehalian, that's the cancer ward, and the intensive care unit.

I have been beside dozens of human beings that have been travelling a very, very difficult pathway. It's true that I myself seems to have got off so far fairly lightly. But I certainly have been among people for whom that's not been the case.

I wonder, do you ever feel that God is treating you unfairly, or His dealings or discipline with you are somewhat severe? That the afflictions He puts us through seem over the top for such a breath as us, such an ephemeral, fragile and fleeting being?

[10:30] Well, you're not alone. Because you find this in this psalm, and you find it in many other psalms. The psalms are never idealistic or romantic, and I thank God for that.

Some preachers can be idealistic and romantic, but the psalms aren't. They face head-on every twist and turn of the pilgrim and the believer in God.

Now, I want to try and touch on four things from this psalm. David's suffering in silence. David's spiritual insight.

Suffering faith and hope. And a sufferer's prayer to God. So, let me begin with David's suffering in silence.

David begins this psalm by saying, I said, I will guard my ways.

[11:52] That's a sort of general statement, but particularly 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. So, we get immediately at the beginning of this psalm, David is in great distress.

Oh, he's a believer. He knows he's got a hope. He knows that God is for him. He knows all that. But he's in great distress. But even though he's in great distress, remarkably, he's concerned that he might not let loose some of those sea of emotions, like turmoil that are going on within his inner being and his thoughts and feelings.

That perhaps not too many people know about. But he doesn't want to see anything, especially in the presence of, by the way, when the Psalms use the phrase wicked.

It's not the most helpful phrase, because it's really a phrase for those that are not God's people. It's not saying that every single human being is as wicked as wicked could be.

[13:28] They're unbelievers it's talking about, and David is concerned that he might let slip some of the thoughts that he has about God.

And that's the reason that he has made this pledge, an intentional pledge. Do you see that? I said that I will guard my mouth, lest I see anything in the presence.

Such was his reverence for God that he describes his pledge of total silence as putting a muzzle on his mouth. There's the metaphor.

Of course he didn't go to Amazon and buy a muzzle and stick it on his mouth. He's trying to see how committed he wanted to be not to say anything that dishonored God in the presence of unbelievers.

And it shows us, does it not, it shows us David's reverence and care for God's honor.

[14:47] Even at a time of his own weakness, when these great wave of emotions and feelings and thoughts are crying out with him for an outlet and for expression, remember I said it was a listening service that I was in in Airdrie.

It was a proper listening service. We had training.

We had different things that we went to to equip us for this. And it was obviously not just physical listening.

And so many people who sat in that service said, I feel I've been listened to for the first time.

Yeah. So that in itself was something.

[15:57] And secondly, they said, I feel I've taken control of some of the things that's going on within me through you allowing me to do that and to offload that.

I feel I've taken some control of it. So it's maybe not rocket science, let's say, that we read with David, I held my peace, verse 2, to no avail, and my distress grew worse.

And I believe in the following statement in verse 3, he's talking about his inner emotions. It grew worse. And here's how it grew worse.

My heart became hot within me. The intensity of these emotions and feelings started to boil as I mused the fire burned.

Then I spoke with my tongue. It isn't really a good thing to suffer in silence.

[17:21] Yes, we do have to watch what we say, perhaps, to unbelievers. But we really, I think in other cultures, perhaps, the United States, I don't know, they're much more open, even men, believe it or not, are much more open to saying, hey guys, I'm struggling.

And you know, I'll tell you this, if people were able to say that and there was somebody who would be truly listening to them, I believe they would benefit.

Anyway, there's David and he had this policy of silence. It didn't work. But now David's in a better place. Then I spoke with my tongue, oh Lord.

Now you're in the right track, David. God is big enough to hear anything that you bring to him. And listen, there's no point in hiding anything from him, David, because he knows everything about you anyway and he knows your thoughts so far off.

And I'll tell you another thing, he knows your feelings because Jesus is touched with the feeling of our fragility and our weakness.

[18:49] Because he was tested in all points like as we were. I want to look now at my second point because this has led me into this second point as David gives up his silence alone and now starts to speak and let it be known but before God.

And there's essentially two truths that David speaks about in verses 4, 5, and 6 really. And they are arising out of his furnace of suffering.

Two truths, if you like, concerning our existence as human beings and one is how fragile and fleeting our lives are.

Oh Lord, make me to know my end and what is the measure of my days. Now, I want you to notice that word know and it's spoken on two occasions in verse 4, isn't it?

Oh Lord, make me know my end, what is the measure of my days. There's the parallelism again. Let me know how fleeting I am. And what I think David is saying, help me Lord to really grasp this.

[20:26] And as I say, me being working in places like Robin House and York Hill, oh yeah, I've seen how fleeting life can be. How long And sometimes when we're younger, we feel so alive.

Not everybody, but lots of us, we feel alive, we feel we can conquer, we feel we can do anything. And maybe as life rolls on, we begin to find and discover some of our weaknesses that we need help from.

How fragile and fleeting is our life. David says in verse 5, you've made my days a few handbreads and my lifetime is as nothing before you.

Now, you might wonder, why is David at this point concerned about how fleeting and ephemeral and short and brief his life really is?

It's because of his suffering. It's because, in a sense, it's maybe not stated explicitly, but I believe it's there implicitly. If you look close enough, it's because he's basically saying to God, why are you

unleashing all this on me?

[22:03] Who's a breath? Because later on in verse 9, note, 9b, you could call it, the second line, for it is you who have done it.

So, as I look at secondary, if you like, causes. I can see those secondary causes and so forth and so on.

I can see what maybe brought this about in time and contemporary time and the moments. But, you know, behind all of that, it's you, God, that have done it.

Don't mean to be irreverent, but the buck stops at you. But David not only is bringing before God and asking that he might know these things, but he's also saying there's something absurd about life.

He says there in verse 6, these are spiritual insights I believe he's gaining. He might have known them, you know, how ephemeral and in a kind of intellectual way and so on, but he hadn't really grasped them in an existential way.

[23:52] He says, surely a person goes about as a shadow, almost like a dream, almost like nothing, almost like having no real substance.

Surely for nothing, they're in turmoil. Humans heap up wealth and don't know who will gather.

Now, you may or may not have heard of an Irish playwright called Samuel Beckett. Yeah, I did two years English as well, and I came across Samuel Beckett at uni.

And Beckett was an exponent of what he called the theater of the absurd. Because without God, life is utterly absurd in the way that he's just outlined it.

Without ultimate meaning. Listen, people of course get non-ultimate meaning, and non-ultimate hope, and non-ultimate goals.

[25:16] One of Beckett's plays is called Waiting for Godot.

G-O-D-O-T. There is nothing in the stage, utterly and absolutely nothing. No choreography.

Two people are there, talking to each other, gobbledygook, meaningless talk. And this is what Beckett is trying to get across.

You remove God, you remove any ultimate meaning and purpose to the human life.

Life. I hope you're able to see some of these things that David is seeing just now.

[26:33] And I trust that you would do what David is doing if you've got lots of things that are bothering you and bring them to God and bring them to His Word.

So, we've looked at David there, gaining some spiritual insight, but the other thing I want to explore for a little bit is the suffering and the faith and the hope.

And I can tell you that there's no question about it, and this is the intriguing thing about all those even lament and complaint psalms, the issue from people with faith.

Actually, this whole psalm is filled with faith. But if you wanted explicit examples, I said, I will guard my ways that I may not sin with my tongue.

I was mature, I was mute and silent and so on. So, he's very, very concerned that he doesn't sin.

Are we concerned that we don't sin?

[28:00] In verse 4, he uses the word Lord in capitals which point to, among other things, the covenant God. Lord, Lord, Lord, Lord, notice the pathos and the seriousness and the intense feeling of that.

This is someone vocative that's crying out to God, O Lord! Make me know my end.

This is real prayer. in verse 7 and now oh Lord again what do I wait for and in verse 12 hear my prayer oh Lord block capitals again and it's good to notice that I think it is anyway he's not lost his faith because he's speaking like that he's speaking like that because he's got the faith I love this verse 7 and I want you to notice this verse 7 comes bang in the center of this psalm there's six verses before it and six verses after it and I love this this verse 7 and now having articulated all those things having been given an outlet for them having expressed them and having expressed it's the plight of humanity you know you notice that he's gone from my personal thing to the whole of humanity having seen this is the this is the plight of the whole of humanity every single human being and now oh Lord for what do I wait these words these words that word wait has a connotation of expectation of hope and of course he uses the word hope in the very next line there my hope is in you these are brilliant that's a brilliant place that he's come to

I think in this psalm so simple my hope is in you and by the way hope is a cousin of faith and hope is integral to faith you don't hear so much about hope you did hear a wee bit from Andy Burnham he

said let's as a country believe and have hope I want to bring back belief and hope belief in what hope in whom my hope says God it says says David is in you is your hope tonight have you staked everything I know I have for 54 years and an awful lot of those questioning psalms and these doubts and these these kind of psalms have kept me going for those 54 years against his existential existential crisis

David looks away from its absurdity from its beckoning absurdity and says my hope is in God and how does that hope unfold for David deliver me from all my transgressions now I was interested when I was reading that and you could say it will save me from all my transgressions and this is the only point I want to make we do not only need our sins forgiven we need to be liberated from the enslaving power of sin don't make me make me the scorn of the fool for it is you who have done it and look at the language you use use your stroke from me

[33:22] I'm done he's saying I'm done I'm spent by the hostility of your hand when you discipline a man with rebukes for sin you consume like a moth what a phrase that is what a phrase that is in Robin Hood in York Hill you consume like a moth what is dear to him what is dear to him what can be more dear to anybody but their child what can be more dear to anybody like their health and well-being what can be more dear to anybody but their loved ones I finish with

David's prayer and I want you to try notice the sort of thrust of it the theme of it the urgency of it and how it's repeated hear my prayer then there's the O again O Lord give ear to my cry and ironically don't you be silent hold not your peace at my tears and then the most incredible part I think in a way of this psalm you could say it's pretty daring look away from me that I may smile again before I depart and am no more isn't that incredible don't it's incredible because here is David quite frankly saying to God give me more time on earth give me more time with those things that are dear to me and those people that are dear to me yeah the reality and the honesty of the psalms there was no greater sufferer than Jesus Christ I love these words these are not words of Jesus I think they're probably from the psalms he knows our frame and remembers that we are dust

God can be far more gentle you know than preachers and Jesus was touched with the feeling touched not just that he knew them but touched with the feeling of our weaknesses do you have hope beyond the fragile fleeting existentialism of human existence do you have hope beyond our existential brevity and and meaninglessness can you identify with

David's hope in God and will you far from asking God to look away from you I want to change that last part and I want to ask will you ask God to look upon you if you haven't already done so with his mercy and his love and his forgiveness may the Lord bless these things to each one of us for his glory and for our eternal will