

Psalm 39

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[0:00] Turn to the book of Psalms. We're going to be looking at Psalm 39 this morning.! We have been for the last, I don't know, probably eight or maybe even nine years, been slowly! walking through the Psalms. So we try to cover around five a year, and so that puts us now at Psalm 39. I figure that's a good pace to take 30 years, so I'll be just shy of 70 by the time we finish. And yeah, so I'll probably have to pass this on to somebody else at some point in time, but that's all right. We've made our way, though, over the last several years through several of the Psalms, and now this morning we've arrived at Psalm 39. And so if you have found Psalm 39, then I would invite you to stand again to your feet. We're going to read the whole Psalm.

It's not a long one, but it's also not a short one, so bear with me. Psalm 39. We are told that it is written to the choir master, to Jedithon, that it is a Psalm of David. And David writes, 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.

Then I spoke with my tongue. Oh, 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 hand breaths, and my lifetime is nothing before you. Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath. Surely a man goes about as a shadow. Surely for nothing they are in turmoil. Man heaps up wealth and does not know who will gather. And now, oh 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 what is dear to him. Surely all mankind is a mere breath. Hear my prayer, oh 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.

God, we thank you for this. Thank you that you, your spirit inspired David to write this. And we also ask now that you would give us insight and help us to see how the truths that David writes in his own anguish can guide us and help us. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. You guys can take a seat.

Several years ago, I read a story. I read of a study that had been done by a group of scientists where they took two groups of rats and they put them in tanks of water. And the only difference between them was one group of rats, they just left them in the water. It was deep enough that they had to tread water to stay above water. But for the other tank, every few minutes, they would lift one of the rats out of the water and keep it out of the water for a little bit and then just put it right back in. And the tank of rats that were not, were never lifted out of the water, no one was ever given relief. They were all dead within about two hours. The tank with the other rats, even though overall, they spent the same amount of time, they had to exert the same amount of energy, most of them survived to around 24 hours. The only difference between the two groups was that one group, because they saw periodically another rat being lifted out of the water, all of them were given a kind of hope that they too might be able to get out of the water, that there was a possibility of some sort of release or break. Never mind that they all ended up back in the water. There was this possibility and it enabled them to live a lot longer because hope is a powerful thing. In fact, many psychologists today believe that among all the different states of mind that a person can have that may contribute to their success, whether you're talking about professional athletes or really highly successful businessmen, one of the traits, the mental states that they've been able to track fairly consistently through highly successful people is that they are very hopeful in regards to the future.

[4 : 52] They believe that there's something better that they can achieve more or they can receive more at some point in the future. Hope is a very powerful thing and hope is really the center of this particular psalm. Now, it may be that as we were reading through this psalm that it just kind of seemed like a jumble of confusing verses. And that is how it seems when you first start to read through this psalm.

It almost seems like it's just combined of different things from different places or different thoughts that David has and they almost don't have any kind of arrangement at all initially. In fact, there are some biblical scholars who would argue that this psalm was just kind of thrown together.

That somebody at some point in time just took bits and pieces of other things that various writers had written and they stuck them together in this psalm and that's why it's kind of bumpy as you read through it and it doesn't flow as smoothly as we might want it to. It's not easy to outline.

But we believe that this psalm was written by David under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. And so as bumpy as it may seem, there is a purpose to the ups and downs of this particular psalm.

And you can see that purpose if you can recognize what is the center of the psalm. What is the central message of this passage? And it's found in verse 7.

[6 : 23] Take a look at verse 7 with me and you'll see how hope-filled this psalm really is. There are two different words here that can be translated hope.

The first is translated wait in the ESV. But it could just as easily be translated in what do I hope? And then there's a different word in the second half of the verse that also means hope.

My hope is in you. This is actually the turning point of the entire psalm. Prior to this, things are pretty negative. After this, though his circumstances have not necessarily changed, David's outlook on those circumstances has changed entirely.

Hope transforms the way that David sees the things around him and the way that he interacts with others around him. At the beginning of the psalm, David is not looking out at the world and his circumstances with a great amount of hope.

But by the end, even though he's still facing difficulties, he has hope. This is the center of the psalm. Hope is the main message of this psalm.

[7 : 40] But we do need to make some careful distinctions, I think, so that we can understand what the Bible means when it talks about hope. We have to, first of all, I think, distinguish between biblical hope and what we might call earthly hope.

I thought about calling it worldly hope, but that carries the connotation that it's somehow sinful, and I don't think it is. It's just not as good as biblical hope. So that when we usually normally use the word in English, we say things like, well, I hope that I'll get that job I've applied for, or I hope that the Astros win the World Series this year.

We use the word hope as in an uncertain kind of wish. This is what we want to happen, but we really have no idea and no control over whether or not it happens at all.

It's just kind of wishful thinking. That's earthly hope. It's not wrong. It's not sinful. We can have that kind of hope about all sorts of things around us, and there's nothing wrong with it.

It's just not as good as what we're going to call biblical hope. Hope, biblical hope, is a future-oriented confidence in the promises of God.

[8 : 49] It's future-oriented, and it's confident. It stands with great confidence, and it's looking toward the thing that it's focused upon are the future promises of God.

And in that, we can see the difference. Another careful distinction that we want to make, the difference between faith and hope. Faith is a broader category than hope. Faith includes hope, but faith may be oriented toward the past, or the present, or the future.

It can be oriented in any of those directions. So that we have faith that Christ died for our sins, that he paid the price for our sins in the past.

So that's a backward-looking faith to something that has already been accomplished in the past. Our sins have been paid for by Christ. That's faith, but it's oriented toward the past.

We can have faith that God is at work in us in the present, or we can have faith in God's future promises. And when our faith is oriented toward God's future promises, that's what we normally mean when we talk about biblical hope.

[9 : 58] I like the way that John Piper says it. He says that hope is faith in the future tense. That's what it is. It's forward-looking faith that grabs hold of the promises of God that have not yet come to fruition in your life, that are out there, but that are certain, sure, and steady.

You can count on them. You can have confidence in them. That's what biblical hope is. And that is the central message of this psalm.

That David begins in this psalm without looking ahead to the future, without trusting and relying upon God. In fact, he begins this psalm, interestingly enough, by talking to himself.

We always think of the psalms as prayers, and they are, but at the beginning of this prayer, David actually narrates his own sort of internal conversation.

I don't know if you have conversations with yourself. I do all the time, and they're not even the best conversations, to be honest with you, but I have them all the time. Well, David has a conversation with himself in which he's trying to get himself to do something.

[11 : 08] Take a look at verse 1. He says, I said, I will guard my ways that I might not sin with my tongue.

I will guard my mouth with a muzzle so long as the wicked are in my presence. So David is telling himself, be quiet.

Keep your mouth shut. That's his resolve. That's what he tells himself he needs to do in this moment. Because whatever the circumstances were, and we have no idea when he wrote this psalm or what was happening in his life, whatever the circumstances were, there were people that surrounded him that were not favorable toward him.

They may have even been his enemies. And he counsels himself, while you're in their presence, just keep your mouth shut. Maybe you've said something like that to yourself.

Maybe you've had coworkers, and you know, if I say anything, it's not going to be nice. If I enter into this conversation, things will not go well.

[12:10] And so you sit at your desk, and you say to yourself, just be quiet. Just don't say it. Don't say a word. But how many times do you succeed at that? Because David doesn't succeed.

Not for long. Take a look at what he says. He says, I was mute and silent. So initially, he heeds his own advice. He stays quiet. I was mute and silent.

He says, I held my peace. But then he says, to no avail. He says, my distress grew worse, and my heart became hot within me.

That's a weird phrase. The only other time it's used in the Old Testament that someone's heart becoming hot within them is describing a period of intense anger. So he's growing angrier and angrier as he kind of stays quiet, tries his best to keep to himself.

He says, as I mused, the fire burned. Then I spoke with my tongue. He tries really hard to stay quiet around these people, whoever they are, the wicked who are in his presence.

[13:19] He tries really hard, but at the end of the day, his anger wins, and he speaks out. Now, most of our English translations indicate that starting in verse four, we get an account of what David said, but I don't think that's true at all.

I don't think David tells us what he says. I think he completely switches subjects starting in verse four. So I don't think we know what he says. I don't think that we can expect that whatever he said would have been anything nice, would have been anything that would have borne any good fruit in the moment.

It's probably not. And part of the reason for David's failure is not just that the people around him are so irritating, and it's not just that he has a terrible temper.

It's that David begins by trying to accomplish, to do the right thing, to stay quiet. He begins by trying to do that in his own strength.

He's saying to himself, self, keep your mouth shut. Self, don't interject. And he cannot by himself accomplish that. He can't control even his own mouth, which is not surprising.

[14:27] James tells us that the mouth or the tongue is the most difficult thing for us to control. So it's not surprising that David, in trying to control himself, fails to do that.

But when you continue to read through the psalm, after you move through verse seven, and then you get to verse nine, David simply states, I am mute.

I do not open my mouth, for it is you who have done it. Once David gives up trying to do what he knows he ought to do, in his own strength, in his own power, no longer is it, hey, self, be quiet.

It's just an account of the fact that he is now silent. That he's able to do the thing, by God's strength and God's power, having now set his hope upon God and his promises, he's able to do now what he failed to do earlier.

And I think that's true of us as well. I think that there are a lot of things that we might try to do in our own strength, in our own power, that we will not be able to do.

[15:32] But once we've fixed our hope upon the future promises of God, we will find that in the present, we have power to do the things that we failed to do over and over. But we are creatures of habit.

Even when we've learned that lesson, over and over, even when we've learned that we can't accomplish things or do the right thing on our own, with our own strength, with our own resolve, we still sometimes return to those old ways of trying to do things.

We even have a silly saying to pull yourself up by your own bootstraps, which makes absolutely no sense at all. If you fall on the ground and try to pick yourself up by your shoelaces or by your bootstrap, you're not going to go anywhere.

In fact, that phrase originated in the 19th century not as a declaration of, I can do it by my own strength. It originated as a way of saying, that's an impossible task.

In fact, it was a joke. It was silly. To try to pull yourself up by your own bootstraps meant that you were trying to do the impossible and others were going to laugh at you. But no, not us, Americans.

[16:43] We turn it into something good. Oh, we can do it. We have the power to pull ourselves up. We don't. You don't. You can't fix your situations on your own.

You can't make your life better on your own. It doesn't really matter what the social media gurus tell you. It doesn't matter what the self-empowerment people say to you. You cannot do it on your own, not for any sustained amount of time.

It's a lesson that David learns. And the difference between those who try and fail in their own strength and those who succeed by the strength that God supplies is in fact hope.

Biblical hope. But that biblical hope is preceded by something else. That biblical hope is preceded by us giving up the attempt to do it in our own strength and in our own ways.

It's preceded by us recognizing who we really are. We sometimes do have high opinions of ourselves. We think that we're smart enough or that we're strong enough or that we're skilled enough that we can just figure everything out on our own.

[17:55] If we have a YouTube video, we can do anything, right? I'm proof positive that that's not true at all. Check my plumbing. Check my work on my cars. YouTube does not make me succeed on my own.

We have to recognize that we are deficient. Not only deficient, but that we are sinful fallen creatures who cannot even will to do the right thing fully from our hearts apart from God's grace.

And before David arrives at a declaration of hope, first he confesses this truth about himself. That's what we see in verses four through six. Not David's words that come out in anger.

No, we're not told what those are. We're just told about the reflection that comes after his failure. Here's the reflection. Verse four, O Lord, make me know my end and what is the measure of my days.

Let me know how fleeting I am. Let me know just how weak and temporary my life is.

[19:07] He says, Behold, you have made my days a few hand breaths and my lifetime is as nothing before you. Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath. Surely a man goes about as a shadow.

Surely for nothing they are in turmoil. Man heaps up wealth and does not know who will gather. He sounds a lot like his son Solomon who will write a generation later.

That he's beginning or he's seeing, he's remembering and recognizing who he is and not only who he is but who we all are. He begins with a prayer. Help me to see myself truly.

Help me to see just how short my days are. How small and minuscule my own kingly life is compared to yours. But he expands that to all mankind.

Surely all of us. We're just a breath. And if we're just a breath, we don't have the strength to do the things that even God in his word tells us to do.

[20:13] There's a theological error that I think most Christians make. And that is the assumption that if God commands it, we have the power within ourselves to do it.

That we are convinced that God would never tell us to do something if we don't actually have the power to do that very thing.

And yet the Bible tells us over and over that one of the primary purposes of all of God's commands is to show us that we don't have that strength. We don't have that power.

And apart from God's grace to intervene, to transform us, to even give us the right desires, we're hopeless.

David begins to move from hopelessness to hope by at least recognizing that he doesn't have the strength in himself to do the thing that he knows he ought to do.

[21 : 17] Even a simple thing like just keeping his mouth shut. He can't do that. But in recognizing that, he's taking steps, he's moving in the direction of hope because he's abandoned trusting in himself.

And so what's left if you can't trust in yourself? Turn to the only one in whom you can trust. David, the king, the mighty one in Israel, addresses God as the sovereign one in verse seven.

And now, O Lord. You might notice you read through this psalm. Most of the time when we come across the word Lord, like for instance, verse four or verse 12, it's all capital letters.

You see that in your Bible? All capital letters. I've told you guys this several times. If you're reading the Old Testament and you see either the word Lord or God in all capital letters, then the word that's being translated into English is actually God's name, Yahweh.

But when you see Lord with a capital L and lowercase letters after that, it's not a name, it's a title. And it's a title that means the sovereign one, the ruler.

[22 : 36] David the king begins to turn his hope toward God by first acknowledging that God is the true ruler. He is the sovereign one.

He is the king. And now, O Lord, O sovereign one, for what do I wait? He's now in a position of waiting because he's exhausted his own resources.

He's failed to accomplish things in his own strength and he's seen his own weakness. What's left except to lean into the strength of God himself? And now, O sovereign one, for what do I wait?

Here's the answer. My hope is in you. My hope is in you.

Future-oriented confidence in the promises of God. Paul writes about that in Romans chapter 8.

[23 : 41] In Romans chapter 8, he talks a great deal about the things that God will do for his people in the future. About the glory that awaits his people in the future.

When Christ returns and sets all things right, when he raises us from the dead, when we receive the full inheritance that we have coming through faith in Jesus. He talks about all of those things.

And then in verse 24, he says this. For in this hope, we were saved. Again, hope there. It's looking ahead. It's not looking back.

It's looking forward to future glorification with Christ. For in this hope, we were saved. And then he goes on to say, now hope that is seen is not hope.

It's not hope if you can see it. Because if it's in the future, it's not here yet to be seen, right? You can't see the things that you hope in. Now hope that is seen is not hope.

[24 : 43] For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, note this, we wait for it with patience.

The sign that you are grounded by biblical hope is you're able to wait for God patiently. Now I'm not very good at this.

I thought that I was patient. I even thought that I was patient even after I got married. Because Allie's easy to be married to. So I still thought I was a patient person.

And then we had children. And then I realized that I was a no good, dirty sinner with no patience at all. We struggle to be patient people.

We struggle to wait on the fulfillment of God's promises. But hope imbues us with patience in the present because it reminds us and it gives us confidence that something better awaits us.

[25 : 46] And something better does await us. We who have put our faith in Christ know that someday everything in this world will be judged or transformed.

Someday everything will be set right. all those who seem to get away with wrongdoing in the present will not escape on judgment day.

All the unfairness, all the pain, all of the misery will be done away with. There will be no tears when we dwell with Jesus on the new heaven and new earth.

There will be no threat of death. Our lives will no longer be a vapor and a mist. But we will live forever in the presence of Jesus.

We have a great hope set in front of us. A hope that transcends and is greater and more powerful than whatever we face in this world.

[26 : 52] And I don't say that lightly. I don't say that because I think that your sufferings are trivial. I don't say that because I don't know or I don't believe that some of you have endured real, serious, heartbreaking hardship.

I know you have. I know many of your stories. I know. So many of you have suffered so much more than I have. I do not say that the future hope that we have has power over our present sufferings because I believe that our sufferings are light.

No. Our sufferings are only light compared with the greatness of the glory that is to be revealed in us and to us. They are not light on their own.

But when weighed against the immensity of the future promises of God, they vanish.

However great your suffering, it cannot compare with the glory that is to be revealed in us. And having that kind of hope, knowing that whatever is going on in the present, whatever you have missed out on, whatever you have lost, whatever dreams, whatever earthly hopes have failed to materialize, there's something that outweighs it all in the future.

[28 : 22] Knowing that, believing that, transforms your present. Because it may be that most of your earthly hopes have not come to fruition.

Because when we're young, our earthly hopes are usually set on this idea of who we're going to marry and what they will be like and what our life will look like.

Or maybe they're set upon the future family that we'll have and the number of children that we'll have. When you're young, those are where your earthly hopes lie. And then some of those things may pan out, some of them may not at all.

And as we get older, we set our earthly hopes on other things. That we hope that we will be able to save enough so that we can just rest the last few years.

That we will enjoy a good retirement. But we know that a simple turn in the economy can destroy all of those years of earthly hope.

[29 : 24] And if that's our only hope, what do we have? Some of us have had lots of earthly hopes that have not been realized. Some of us didn't have the childhood that we hoped we would have, didn't have the marriage that you hoped that you would have, didn't become the kind of parent that you hoped that you would be.

You're not now clinging to and hoping in the kind of retirement that you hoped in earlier. Things have not panned out the way that you thought perhaps. Or maybe for some of you, you're still in the throes of that earthly hope and again that's not sinful, that's okay.

But just know that they may not all be realized. And that's okay. It's okay. Because something better and more sure and more steadfast awaits you.

And if you trust, if you have that future oriented trust that we call hope, if you have confidence in those future promises of God, then even when your earthly hopes do not pan out, your life will still be changed and transformed for the better.

look at David's change in perspective. Once we get through verse seven, we have a total change in perspective. Again, the bad things in his life don't disappear. But his assessment of those things changes.

[30 : 48] So he begins, deliver me from all my transgressions. He begins with a reminder that I'm a sinful person. Yeah, deliver me. That our hope is ultimately rooted in God's forgiveness of our sins that comes to us through Christ.

So that if you've not put your faith in Christ, so that your sins are forgiven, never mind future hope, you still stand under God's wrath now.

But pray with David. Trust the way that David trusts. Deliver me from my transgressions. And then he goes on, do not make me the scorn of the fool. He says, I am mute.

Again, turning what he tried to do on his own into something that God is now accomplishing in him. I am mute. I do not open my mouth. For it is you who have done it. You who have done what?

Well, yes, enabled him to be quiet, but that's not what he's talking about. He recognizes that the difficulties that he was facing, that sort of in the immediate thing on an earthly level came from the wicked who were surrounding him, right?

[32 : 00] Or the people that he calls the fool in verse eight. Yeah, that's true. But he sees God's sovereign hand even behind these people who mean to harm him.

He sees now from the perspective of one who has hope, he sees that even his present troubles aren't coming to him apart from God's providential hand.

that there are no disappointments that come into your life, there are no sufferings that enter into your life, that God does not have a plan and a purpose for.

God is sovereign over all things. God is not just in control when the sun shines, he's in control when the storm rages. He's always in control. And David recognizes that.

You have done it. And then he goes on, remove your stroke from me. I am spent by the hostility of your hand. But what is it that he's suffering from?

[33 : 01] The most that we can say is it's brought on by wicked people who are surrounding him. And yet now he recognizes that even behind those wicked people stands the hand of God, doing something, accomplishing something.

He says, when you discipline a man with rebukes for sin, you consume like a moth what is dear to him. And then back to his confession from earlier, surely all mankind is a mere breath.

David is even aware that the sufferings that other people bring into his life might ultimately serve the purpose of God's hand of discipline in his life.

Now last week we saw Psalm 38 all about God's discipline, so we're not going to review everything that we said there. But sometimes the things that happen to us, even the bad things that happen to us, sometimes they do come as God's hand of discipline for our sin.

And David knows that. They don't always come for that reason. In fact, many times we don't really know the various causes and reasons for the bad things that come into our lives.

- [34:09] We shouldn't automatically jump to the conclusion that if we suffer, it's because we did something wrong. We should consider that possibility. That's what we said last week. Consider it as possible. It may be the case, but we shouldn't assume that that's the case.

Remember the story. I mentioned this last week. Remember the story of the man born blind in John chapter 9, where Jesus' disciples say, Jesus, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?

Somebody's sin must have caused this bad thing, this suffering that came into his life. And Jesus said, well, it wasn't this man and it wasn't his parents. It wasn't anybody's sin, but it was for the glory of God.

A man was born blind and lived nearly four decades of his life in blindness, so that on this particular day, the glory of God would shine forth through Jesus as he gave him his sight back.

God would shine back. We don't know all the immediate causes of our suffering, but what we do know is that for those who belong to Christ, God will use and purposes all of our sufferings for his glory and even for our good.

- [35:24] Your suffering may come as a result of God's discipline, God's plan. But it certainly comes as a part of God's plan. And you can see that if you view it through the eyes and the lens of hope.

Look how David finishes out. Hear my prayer, O Lord, and give ear to my cry. Hold not your peace at my tears. There's no indication that his suffering has been removed.

His perspective has changed. For I am a sojourner with you, a guest, like all my fathers.

I don't belong in this place. I don't belong in this land. Sojourner among the Israelites is usually used to refer to someone who's not an Israelite, who's living in the land of Israel.

David is the king of Israel. And he says, I'm a sojourner here. What he means is not I'm a sojourner in Israel. I'm a sojourner in this world. This is all temporary for me, just like it was for my fathers.

- [36:30] Look away from me that I may smile again, he says, before I depart and am no more. My life, I will depart. My life is short compared to your plans and purposes.

This world is not our home. And as much as David received, as much good, as many good things as David received, he was king.

He had rooms of gold. He had armies at his disposal. As much as he had, he recognized he was just a traveler moving through.

if you set your hope on earthly things, then you'll make this world your home.

And when those earthly things fade and disappear, you will be left hopeless, having tried to do it all on your own and only encountered failure at the end of it.

- [37:42] But if you have everything you ever wished for, or nothing that you ever wished for, and your hope is in the promises of God, grounded and rooted in what he's already done in the past, Jesus died for our sins.

Jesus rose from the dead. So that in the future, on judgment day, we won't be condemned because our sins are paid for, and we will rise from the dead just like Jesus rose from the dead.

That's hope for the future. If our hope is in those things, whether we have it all or lose it all or never even get our hands on any of it in this life, it really, truly, doesn't matter.

But Christ be all for you and all else will not ultimately matter. Let's pray.