

## The Song of Steadfast Sojourners

Psalm 39

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In the summer of 2006, I led a team of 16 people on a mission trip to Malindi, Kenya. We flew into Nairobi and then to Malindi on Kenya's East Coast. We worked there for a week, walking through villages, sharing the gospel, and holding open-air worship services. We stayed at a Baptist camp that was very primitive. Long story short, I got extremely sick on the day we were scheduled to fly home. I had a very high fever, intestinal issues, and was throwing up. We flew back to Nairobi that morning and prepared to fly out at midnight. We got to the airport to check in at the British Airways counter, and I looked like death warmed over.

I was sweating and nauseated. To make it even more difficult, the TSA agents pulled me out of line and thoroughly searched my bags. Stacy looked at me and said, *"You've got to keep it together, or you're not going to get on the plane."* We finally got to the counter, and I had everyone's tickets and passports. I handed them all to the lady at the counter, and she told me we were there too early, that she couldn't take them. I turned to the guy behind me, Chris, and handed him all the tickets and passports. I told him to hand them back to everyone, and he said, *"Why?"* I replied, *"Because I'm going to pass out,"* and boom, I hit the floor. When I woke up, my pastor's wife was slapping me in the face, trying to wake me up. I popped up, looked at the lady at the counter, and said, *"I'm okay, let's get our team on the plane."* She looked at me and said, *"You're not getting on the plane."*

Well, I didn't get on the plane, and eventually I wound up in the hospital that night, while the team flew back to Texas without me, Stacy, and her friend, Deanne. At the hospital, the doctors couldn't figure out what was wrong with me. They pumped me full of antibiotics and fluids, which helped some, but didn't get me well. Stacy's best friend, Deanne, stayed to help her. It was another week before we could get home, and the whole time we were there, I was getting sicker and sicker. I couldn't eat, and the fever and stomach pain would come and go and get more and more intense with each cycle. That was one of the longest, most painful weeks of my life. All I wanted to do was go home, see my girls and my son. Well, we finally got home, and it took another two months for the doctors to figure out what was wrong. By the time they did, I was in constant pain and had lost down to 190 pounds. I was skin and bones. Then it took another six months for me to get completely well.

There is so much more to this story than I'm telling you. If you want the whole story, let Stacy tell it to you, because I was out of it and don't remember much. She and Deanne went through some crazy stuff trying to take care of me. For instance, Stacy tried to get Deanne to go home, but Deanne said, *"Stacy, what if he dies? I don't want you to be alone."*

I wished I could say that Psalm 39 was one of those Psalms that anchored my heart during a time of trial and suffering, but it didn't. Actually, when I read Psalm 39, I'm convicted of my sinful attitude. I most certainly felt the pain of vv. 7-11 because I felt like I was experiencing the heavy hand of the Lord's discipline. I felt like the moth in v. 11, that I had been consumed. There was one verse I did pray from Psalm 39, it was v. 13:

*Look away from me, that I may smile again,  
before I depart and am no more!"*

Friends, there are seasons in life when our souls feel caught between silence and sorrow. We know we should trust God, yet our hearts wrestle with questions about suffering and its meaning for our lives. In those moments, we often struggle with words. Should we speak honestly about our pain to others? Or should we stay quiet so as not to dishonor God in front of unbelievers? How do I respond to all that is happening to me?

King David wrestled with the same tension in Psalm 39. He directed this song/prayer *"to the choirmaster: to Jeduthun."* It is a deeply reflective prayer that explores *four profound realities*: First, we have limits, and we can

reach that boiling point. Second, life is fleeting, so hold fast to Jesus. Third, our hope is secure in Christ. Finally, we must cry out for God's mercy when life hits the breaking point.

Here's the main point: *Our lives are painfully brief and fragile, and true hope is found only in Christ—not in ourselves, or in the things of this world.*

David wrote this psalm in a moment of deep inner struggle. At first, he tried to stay silent about his suffering, but as the pressure built, he had to speak — not to others, but to God. What follows is a sober reflection on suffering as a result of his sin, and this reflection can also be applied to suffering in general. Let's walk through Psalm 39 and see what King David learned and how it will help us.

The first thing we see is the context or the setting of what David learned in vv. 1-3. These verses connect with Psalm 38 and help us understand David's mental state as he endured the Lord's discipline in his life because of his sin.

Here's an obvious truth: *Everyone reaches a boiling point.* Do you know what a pressure cooker is? Before there were InstaPots, we used pressure cookers. I remember growing up watching my mother cook with one, and up until a few years ago, Stacy would use one. Those things always fascinated me. You put the meat in the pot with some broth, make sure the gasket is sealed, turn on the stove, set the heavy little pressure cap on the nozzle that is on the lid, and let it cook for a few hours. As it cooked, steam would escape through the nozzle, making that sound of "*shh, shh, shh.*" If it got too hot or was close to being done, it would blow that little cap off the lid, and steam would go everywhere. You didn't want to be near the pressure cooker when the top blew off. You would get covered with hot steam, and you might even smell like burned meat.

This is kind of what's going on in vv. 1-3. King David had been in the pressure cooker of suffering for his sin in Psalm 38, and now, as he writes Psalm 39, he had reached the boiling point. Listen to what he prays:

*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."*

<sup>2</sup> *I was mute and silent;  
I held my peace to no avail,  
and my distress grew worse.*

<sup>3</sup> *My heart became hot within me.  
As I mused, the fire burned;  
then I spoke with my tongue:*

Verses 1-3 connect it to Psalm 38 and provide context for King David's mental state. David is suffering because of his sin. He is under the loving but painful, corrective discipline of the Lord that seems to have lasted a long time. As a result, David was struggling. He was wrestling with his emotions. He had reached the breaking point.

At first, he held his tongue and didn't say anything sinful. Yet, while he was silent, it didn't produce anything good. His pain intensified, and his anger grew inside of him until he was like the pressure cooker — he was about to blow. Verse 3 tells us that his heart was on fire, and he finally spoke to unleash his pain. He cried out, "*LORD!*"

We learn four helpful takeaways from the context of King David's suffering. First, what we say is very important. We can sin with our mouths when we are suffering so we must be careful.

Second, it is better to be silent than to say wrong things about God that wicked people can misunderstand or use against God. This would be like Job's friends who spoke wrongly about God's work in Job's life.

Third, we shouldn't be too anxious to share our grief with just anyone. Be wise about who you share your grief with and how often you do so.

Fourth, God should always be the first person we take our grief to, not the last. We can take our pain and anger to the LORD. We can pray honest, raw prayers. We should also ask the LORD for clarity as we endure suffering. Sometimes the Lord gives it and sometimes not, but we can ask. We should ask God to give us a hopeful perspective in our suffering.

Now, from this setting or context, God gave King David *three truths* that provided him with *perspective* when he reached the boiling point while enduring suffering for his sin. These truths will help us, too, as we endure suffering for our sin or suffering in general.

#### I. Life is a vapor, so live for the reality of Christ (vv. 4-6)

The first perspective that the LORD gave King David in his suffering is that life is short, so don't waste it in turmoil over your suffering. Listen to what King David prayed in vv. 4-6:

*"O LORD, make me know my end  
and what is the measure of my days;  
let me know how fleeting I am!  
<sup>5</sup> Behold, you have made my days a few handbreadths,  
and my lifetime is as nothing before you.  
Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath! Selah  
<sup>6</sup> 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!"*

Look at how many phrases he uses to show that life *is like a vapor*. Underline these phrases in your Service Guide or Bible: "*how fleeting I am (v. 4),*" "*my days [are] a few handbreadths (v. 5),*" "*my lifetime is as nothing before you (v. 5),*" "*a mere breath (v. 5),*" and "*a shadow (v. 6).*"

What does the Apostle James tell us in James 4:14,

*What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then  
vanishes.*

God gave King David wisdom and perspective on the brevity of life as he prayed. As a result, he concluded in v. 6 by saying:

*Don't live in turmoil*

The word "*turmoil*" in v. 6 means to murmur and complain. Now, understands that life is too short to sit around complaining about all the bad things that have happened to him, even if they were because of his sin.

The last line of v. 6 seems to be out of place unless you understand the human heart. Look at what he writes:

*Man heaps up wealth and does not know who will gather!*

Why would he say this? Think about what David and James wrote when thinking about the brevity of life. One of the ways that people try to add value and meaning to their brief lives is through wealth.

In this context, one of the ways people try to soothe the pain of their suffering is through wealth. Remember, this is the King speaking here. David already had all he wanted, and it didn't ease his pain or give his life meaning.

Listen when people are suffering; many people try to make themselves feel better by accumulating wealth or shopping. They shop to get a dopamine hit when the stock market is up. They get a dopamine hit when they click the "*add to cart*" button on Amazon. Do you know what I mean?

Verse 6 exhorts us not to waste time complaining or investing in shadows. The question is: Are you putting your hope in the shadows of this world or in God? Friends, David learned to live for reality, for his LORD. Let your suffering move you from hanging on to shadows to living in the reality of Christ.

#### II. Our hope is secure in Christ (vv. 7-11)

After contemplating the fleeting nature of life, David asks a critical question:

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

This verse is the turning point of the Psalm. If life is short, and God is the true reality, He is where we should place our hope. David's answer is clear: Our hope must be in God alone. He realizes his hope is secure when he begins to get honest with the LORD about how he feels.

This is a very important shift in the Psalm. David asked a "what" question. He basically wanted to know "what" is the meaning of life when everything seems like vanity. However, his "what" question got a "who" answer. It's not "What is the meaning of life?" but "Who is the meaning of life?"

The meaning of life is found in the LORD. Let's read through vv. 7-11 and hear David's prayer:

*And now, O Lord, for what do I wait?*

*My hope is in you.*

<sup>8</sup> *Deliver me from all my transgressions.*

*Do not make me the scorn of the fool!*

<sup>9</sup> *I am mute; I do not open my mouth,  
for it is you who have done it.*

<sup>10</sup> *Remove your stroke from me;  
I am spent by the hostility of your hand.*

<sup>11</sup> *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! Selah*

David's confession of sin is a theme in the last four Psalms of Book 1. In each of these, David waits for God to relent and rescue him. David points us forward to Christ, who made Himself one with us. *He points us to the One who knew no sin but became sin for us so that we may become the righteousness of God.*

Our hope is secured in Jesus because He was delivered for our transgressions. He was scorned like a fool for our sins. He didn't open His mouth when He was accused and condemned. God didn't remove the stroke of His wrath from Jesus so that we would not experience the wrath of God. Jesus was despised, rebuked, and rejected because of our sin. On the cross, His life was consumed like the moth under the white-hot wrath of God.

Jesus received the fullness of the wrath of vv. 7-11 and by His resurrection from the dead, He overcame because His hope was in God. And, because His hope was secure in God, He secured our hope in God.

Palm Sunday reminds us that our hope is secure. Palm Sunday says, "Here comes the One who can save us." And we celebrate that just like the people did in Jesus' day. But here was the shocker for the people who saw Him ride in as the Savior on Palm Sunday. Jesus doesn't save us with an army and riding in on a white horse. Instead, on Good Friday: "He saves us not by removing suffering—but by entering it with us." And only through His suffering is our deepest problem — sin — dealt with.

Now, when we go through suffering, we wait on the One who has secured our hope. We wait on the Lord.

*And now, O Lord, for what do I wait?*

*My hope is in you.*

What does waiting for Him look like? Since our hope is secure, it looks like not giving in to fear, anger, and hopelessness, even when it seems the bad guys are winning. It looks like delighting in the Lord while you are waiting. It looks like not giving in to foolish words of anger while we wait.

But, here's the deal: None of these aspects of waiting are natural for us. In order for us to wait, we need the LORD to do a supernatural work in our hearts. We need Him to empower us with His grace and mercy.<sup>1</sup> This leads us to our last point.

III. Cry out for God's mercy (vv. 12-13)

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Tripp, *Everyday Gospel*, 206.

We have seen this point over and over in the Psalms. This is because it is so fundamental to the Christian life, but it is also the one thing we most often forget to do. Let's consider this deeply emotional prayer in vv. 12-13:

*"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!"*

David continues to pour out his heart to God by appealing to God's compassion. The Bible frequently portrays God as attentive to the cries of His people. The tears of believers are never ignored. He asks God to enter into his pain with him and journey with him in it. That prayer is answered, but not right then. It is answered in Jesus because Jesus entered our pain and suffering when He came to this earth and lived a sinless life and then died to pay for our sins on the cross. This is how Jesus entered our suffering to give us the song of the steadfast sojourner in Psalm 39 that says:

*Life is a vapor, it fades like the dawn,  
Here for a moment, then suddenly gone.  
Yet hope is anchored, steady and sure,  
Held in a promise forever secure.  
So we cry out for mercy, hearts open wide,  
Through every valley, Jesus walks by our side.  
On this long road, through joy and through pain,  
The Lord travels with us, again and again.  
When shadows surround us, and tears fall like rain,  
His grace is our shelter, His love will remain.  
Life is a vapor, but we are not alone—  
Our hope is secure in Jesus as He leads us home.*

May you find your hope secure in Christ this morning.