

THE PSALM OF A TROUBLED PERSON

Psalm 39

Dr. George O. Wood

There's a psalm to fit really about every occasion in life. Psalm 39 is a wonderful psalm. If you're going through a melancholy or difficult moment of perplexity in your life, this psalm absolutely fits the bill. I'm calling it "The Psalm of a Troubled Person." Not troubled in the sense of being schizophrenic—that kind of trouble. But just bummed out. A lot of psalms focus on that. Aren't you glad that God let people who went through that record it and not deny their emotions, but get it out there for us and give us prayers that we can work through when we're kind of that way ourselves?

Maybe I should take a moment to read the psalm in its entirety. In giving an introduction to a psalm, unless we've taken a moment to kind of get our mind refreshed as to what's in it, the introduction may not make as much sense to us.

"I said, 'I will watch my ways and keep my tongue from sin; I will put a muzzle on my mouth [that could be a life verse, couldn't it?] as long as the wicked are in my presence.' But when I was silent and still, not even saying anything good, my anguish increased. My heart grew hot within me, and as I meditated, the fire burned; then I spoke with my tongue: 'Show me, O LORD, my life's end and the number of my days; let me know how fleeting is my life. You have made my days a mere handbreadth; the span of my years is as nothing before you. Each man's life is but a breath. *Selah*. Man is a mere phantom as he goes to and fro: He bustles about, but only in vain; he heaps up wealth, not knowing who will get it. But now, Lord, what do I look for? My hope is in you. Save me from all my transgressions; do not make me the scorn of fools. I was silent; I would not open my mouth, for you are the one who has done this. Remove your scourge

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from me; I am overcome by the blow of your hand. You rebuke and discipline men for their sin; you consume their wealth like a moth—each man is but a breath. *Selah*. Hear my prayer, O LORD, listen to my cry for help; be not deaf to my weeping. For I dwell with you as an alien, a stranger, as all my fathers were. Look away from me, that I may rejoice again before I depart and am no more” (Psalm 39:1–13, NIV).

This psalm, I think, helps us see again in our lives why the psalms are such a great resource to us when we go through trouble. They state what often we’re unable to state in quite as eloquent a way when passing through nighttime.

This particular psalm does not fit into some of the normal categories for psalms that we’ve given in the past. It is not really a lament psalm. A psalm of lament is one of bitter complaint. This one has touches of lament to it, of woe for sorrow that David has, but the psalmist is not dwelling on lament. It’s not a confession psalm either. It’s certainly not a royal or a kingly psalm. It’s not a history of Israel psalm. Those are some of the broad classifications for psalms. It instead is a psalm where David is seeking to cope with a situation in which sin has, some way or another, rocked his life. A situation which he doesn’t articulate as to what that manner was. It may be just as well that he doesn’t articulate it. That way we can all identify it and put our own situations in it. But it is a situation which has troubled him, caused him a great deal of mental, spiritual, and emotional stress, and for a long time he has felt the need to sit on his feelings without expressing them. He finds at last that there comes a moment that he must vent what he’s feeling within. We all know that you can only sit on feelings so long. Then sooner or later they seem to need to get vented.

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David shows us how to vent feelings in a good kind of way. I'm not sure I've done as well in my venting as David does with his. But he gives us a marvelous pattern for venting things when they have been pent up inside of us for a period of time.

The superscription of the psalm, "For the director of music," shows that this psalm was once set to music, perhaps either as a solo within temple worship or as a corporate psalm to be used among those who came to worship in the temple. It is specifically for Jeduthun. Who is that character? We do have a reference to him in 1 Chronicles 16:41 and 25:1-3. He is listed as the second of David's three chief musicians. They were the three creative geniuses of David's vast and extensive program of worship and liturgy and musical response in the atmosphere of worship of God. Jeduthun is described as one who prophesied using the harp in thanksgiving and praise to the Lord. What is striking is that his ministry of prophecy was one that was done within the context of his singing, which had musical accompaniment to it. The Scripture has a far different meaning to prophecy than is sometime associated with modern ideas. When we think of prophecy, we think of somebody predicting the future. But prophecy from the point of view of Scripture is someone who really speaks God's heart to man's need. Maybe good anointed preaching or singing, I think, many times translates best what the Scriptures mean by a prophetic word or a gift of prophecy. Jeduthun was one of those tremendous composers of music. He had a genuine anointing of the Spirit upon his life, so that when he began to minister or his choirs began to minister, they spoke to the deep and relevant needs within his audience. He was a person who was anointed by the Spirit, who prophesied using the harp to thank and praise the Lord. The harp in biblical days was probably more like our guitar rather than the modern harps we see. So here is a balladeer that has great power to move and elevate and lift an audience in gospel song.

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David composed this. Maybe Jeduthun was going to set it to music and David gave the words. I would suspect the tune of this song was a little on the blues side. It's not a major key kind of song. The mood is a little bit bound, a little bit somber—more on the minor key.

I think this psalm can be outlined in three different segments. First, there is David's silence in verses 1–3. Then, there is his search for enlightenment from God on his condition in verses 4–6. Then, finally, his request for help in verses 7–13.

I. First, his silence.

The beginning of the psalm rushes us right in today's emotional turmoil. He had made a determination to keep quiet about whatever was bothering him. But sitting on it failed him and he has to vent. While we do not know the particular issue he was facing, we do know, from later in the psalm (verse 10), that God had come down hard on him. "I am overcome by the blow of your hand." It's not as though God slugged him, but God was pushing him down. He had the sense that, somehow, what was going on was related to God's displeasure of him or some action that he had taken. In addition to that, we find in verse 12 that he has been weeping. I'd suggest that's not a common sight—to see a grown man cry—especially when he's a king. Kings don't weep, they rule. But whatever it was, what was going on in his life provoked this kind of emotional response.

I'm grateful for Scripture giving us models of manhood that allow for weeping. The whole idea of the American image of the macho man, where you always keep your feelings to yourself and you don't ever show emotional output, seems to me to be non-biblical in its nature. David was a person who found himself—practically or emotionally—breaking up, if not breaking down. He was really consumed by whatever problem it was he was passing through.

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I think there's only one kind of emotional trauma that is worse than weeping. That is the inability to weep. Because something hurts so bad, you cannot weep.

He has not wanted to talk about what is going on in the presence of "the wicked." "The wicked" is simply David's terminology for the people who do not share this confidence and faith in God.

They are cynics. They are unbelievers. They're persons who have not put their faith in Jehovah.

He has said "I put a muzzle on my mouth as long as the wicked are in my presence" (Psalm 39:1). He did not want his inner turmoil to adversely affect his witness, so that people look at what he is saying—his open articulation of his problems which relate to some kind of judgment of God upon his life—he thought if he shared openly with people who were not believers, that this would not only disgrace him, but would bring the case and cause of God into disrepute and keep people from believing in God. He doesn't want to risk that. He doesn't want to give anyone an occasion to slander God on account of him.

Anybody who genuinely follows the Lord has to have that as a top concern in their life—that our life can be lived in such a way that it does not bring the cause of God into slander. That certainly is a case for what we say as well.

David literally was alone in his problem. Emotions sometimes really cloud an ability to be clear-headed. David is recognizing those times when, in a public setting, we do not declare what is going on in our minds.

David's language epitomizes the struggle he feels between his responsibilities as a leader and his feelings. His feelings are white hot. He says, "My heart grew hot within me. As I meditated, the fire burned" (verse 3). "The longer I thought about this, the more I stewed." He's saying, "I shouldn't talk about this," and he's going back and forth, "Do I vent my feelings or do I act

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responsible as a leader?” He illustrates for us, in this struggle, how really difficult it is to put a muzzle on our mouth. He wanted to do it and he found he couldn’t quite muzzle himself.

I identify with this psalm. One of my worst tendencies as a person is to talk out of turn and to offer my opinion when it’s not asked for. I sometimes say it more strongly than it needs to be said.

Verse 9, “I was silent.” Verse 2, “But when I was silent…” then all of a sudden, “I spoke with my tongue.” He can’t keep quiet anymore.

Some people I know have an amazing ability to sit on their feelings. To stay quiet. To stay gracious and calm. There are people I know that you’d never guess had a problem in this world. They are so wonderful and loving and calm. Yet I know they’re wrestling with things that are incredible. But they have the ability to never give vent. Some people just talk to God and that’s it, and they can get things resolved. Others may find it necessary to talk to one or two. Then there are some of us who need to talk to four, five, six people and vent what’s going on. David is showing us this kind of characteristic.

So he’s breaking his silence. He tried so hard to sit on his speech that he even refrained from saying anything good. But he found his anguish only increased. Finally, something had to break and so he spoke.

II. That brings us to the second part of the psalm (verses 4–6): the search for enlightenment or light on his condition.

You have to be very careful regarding what you say when you’re upset. Especially when you’re angry. Be careful about what you say and be careful about the tone in which you say it—or you compound the problem. Angry speech and upset speech can be extremely explosive. When something explodes, it’s hard to put it back together again. When we lob out the long-distance

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bombs at one another and toss the grenades, it's hard to get it back in the bottle after it's happened. David is feeling like he's going to explode. But surprisingly, David does not explode. "I spoke with my tongue" (Psalm 39:3). Then all of a sudden we find him praying. That's how he has learned to vent what is going on.

Maybe, too, the fact that he's writing down what he is praying is a great help. Keeping a spiritual journal, writing things down, can be a real calming thing. When it gets down on paper somehow it loses a little bit of the heat.

He prays. He's upset, but at least he prays. In poetic language he says, "Show me, O LORD, my life's end and the number of my days" (verse 4). That sounds beautiful, poetic. But what David is really saying is, "How long do I have to go on living? Show me my days, Lord." I think unsaid is, "How much longer, God, do I have to go through this?" I think he's reflecting on the fact that sometimes when you get into the kind of trouble that David is reflecting, when you're faced with situations that don't seem to have human solutions, there is a tendency to throw in the towel, to give up and say, "I'll never get through this. So, Lord, how long have I got? If I know, then I can plan accordingly."

The minute that question is out of David's lips, he instantly recognizes that no matter what duration is left for him, it's really not long at all. "You've made my life a mere handbreadth" (verse 5). A handbreadth in the days in which David was writing is the width of four fingers. It was the shortest Hebrew measurement. That's what David likens his whole life to. James 4:13–15 picks up David's language here, "Life is but a breath." Ecclesiastes picks up the same, "Life is vanity" (Ecclesiastes 1:2). Wealth isn't where it's at. Sex isn't where it's at. Education is not where it's at. It's all vanity.

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David is depressed at this point. Extremely depressed. And depression can be a wonderful bog in which to wallow. And that's where David is. He needs help. Since David didn't have the New Testament, he didn't have the light which we have on the situation. But it's an awful thing to have the sense that life is vain and futile. How sad to come, as David is apparently coming, to the end of your life and think that everything is in vain, that life didn't really count for anything. That it didn't amount to anything. I know that when he speaks these words, he is a troubled saint. He is a person who has had his faith in God, but that faith, for whatever reason, is being rocked now. But there is also the sadness of a person who has never known God and has lived a life, to whatever age, and has come to a frank recognition of "What did it all count for?"

III. Fortunately, there is hope for us in God when we come to a moment like that. David requests help (verses 7–13).

"But now, O Lord, what do I look for when I'm so down in the dumps? When life doesn't seem to matter. When my possessions don't really count. When my relationships aren't really there. What really counts?" The best thing David says in this whole psalm are the next five words, "My hope is in you" (Psalm 39:7). That's the summit of this psalm. Everything before those words is down in the valley, and everything after those words is down in the valley. But that's the peak. "My hope is in you." There are some situations we face in life where the only solution is our personal relationship with God and the hope and help and life he brings. There is no human solution.

"But now" brings that marvelous brief change in tone. The depression is faced with the words "But now, Lord, what do I look for? My hope is in You." Then he goes on to ask the Lord to save him from his transgressions, to not make him a scorn of fools, to remove his scourge from him. If God doesn't remove his scourge from him, he's going to be rebuked and disciplined and

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consumed. Without knowing the particular situation that David is involved in, it's hard to know exactly what form his confession took. But one of the things I really admire, which I think made David a man after God's own heart, when it all comes right down to it—and David could be an absolute scoundrel—is that with all of his weaknesses, he was ultimately willing to accept responsibility for his own actions and to stand before God and not dump on somebody else. I think the thing that really makes him, in the last analysis, a man after God's own heart is that. There's a lot to be said of David in terms of acceptance of responsibility.

His final prayer (verses 12–13) is part of his request for help. It's rooted in his own helplessness and powerlessness. "I dwell with you as an alien." A strange word for a king. If anyone is not an alien, it's the king. In biblical days, an alien was not allowed to own property. They were literally rootless. So David takes this figure of the alien in the land and says, "This is where we all are before God." We're simply sojourners here, transitory people. We really have no property rights. Then this strange prayer. What a depressing way to close a request for help: "Look away from me, that I may rejoice again before I depart and am no more" (Psalm 39:13). "Every time you look at me, you're thinking dark thoughts anyway, so You'd be better off and I'd be better off if You don't look at me anymore. I'll go and, not too long from now, drop into the grave anyway."

I don't end my prayers that way. But David here ends his prayer in this fashion. It's a real downer. It's possible for a saint of God who is in a dark time of his life to get up from a place of prayer with no victory, no sense of assurance, no sense of resolution and no sense of power. If you don't believe that, turn to Psalm 39. David prayed. He went into prayer angry and he got up depressed. These things are part of the spiritual formation of life. If I understand the psalms, this

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is indeed what can happen in our spiritual experience. Sometimes when we get up from prayer, we still don't have a resolution.

Fortunately for us, the Lord doesn't always answer our prayers. That's one of the great things about God. There was once a prayer Peter said to the Lord after the miraculous catch of fish. He said, "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man" (Luke 5:8). The Lord ignored him. The Lord has this beautiful way of ignoring *us* on occasion, as well, if our prayers get so down in the dumps that He knows it's not a thing He wants to do for us. They may be honest as to our feelings, but they do not reflect God's reality.

The very presence of such a down prayer as verse 13 is an indication that God really understands us. The Bible lets us know that. God really does know our frame. He knows how we speak when we get desperate, and when we get desperate, we get depressed and down and may even pray things and sometimes do things that are stupid.

Don't ever take Psalm 39 by itself. When you're done with psalms, add one numeral in front of Psalm 39 and you get the corresponding psalm to go with it. That is Psalm 139. "O LORD, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise. You perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down. You are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD. You hem me in—behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain" (Psalm 139:1-6, NIV). Now David is not saying, "Depart from me, Lord.

You've got your hand heavy on me. I can't take it." Now his whole demeanor has changed.

"Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand

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will hold me fast. If I say, ‘Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,’ [in other words, I can hide] even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you. For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand. When I awake, I am still with you” (Psalm 139:7-18, NIV). What a contrast!

Psalm 39 is B.D.—“before deliverance.” And 139 is A.D.—“after deliverance.” One is really before Christ and the other after. One is before we experience the power of the Resurrection, the other is after. One is on the dark side of the mountain; the other is when we’ve come into the light of day.

By all means, in your praying, don’t neglect to incorporate Psalm 39 in your prayer. It’s a valid part of our prayer life with God. To say to God, “I’m so upset, God. I wish I could talk. I’ve tried my best to be quiet. But now I’ve just got to vent. I’m going to come to You, Lord, and vent.”

When we’re all done with that and we get up depressed, then slip over to Psalm 139 and see that there are days that are better than the days of Psalm 39.

Closing Prayer

Lord, thank You for Your Word. Thank You for the assurance of Your presence with us. Thank You for this model we have in David’s life, of a man who, through his own wrongful choices and through the powerful grasp of circumstances on his life, was bent and twisted in all directions.

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But by the presence of Your Spirit in his life, he somehow always managed to come back up with a straight and true heart, a cleansed conscience and pure motives. Lord, teach us that in our troubled times, when we pray. When we're hot and we're sitting on our emotions and we hardly know what to do with them because we feel so bad. Who has not had a time when they felt so bad? There are moments in life like that. But You're not abandoning us in those moments. Your Spirit has not gone away from us. You're with us. You're pulling us through those times. So we want to thank You for that. I thank You for the truth that a better day is around the corner as we walk with you. The most important thing we can say in our lives, at any time is: "My hope is in You." Even when everything is going well and there's money in the bank and there's health in the body and joy in the home, even in those times, our hope must be in You. Help us in our own spiritual walk and formation as a Christian, to keep that perspective clear. In You we hope. Thank You for your presence here this evening. We bless You. In Jesus' name. Amen.