

2. Between a Rock and a Hard Place

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[0 : 00] Well, let's turn to Psalm 39 again, please.

Page 467. Well, I think that I can promise you a rather dark and sombre sermon this evening from this psalm.

But don't head for the door, please, just because I've said that. Because in an odd way, in an odd way, the dark and sombre passages in the Bible can be mightily comforting.

Because they give us permission to look at things that we might otherwise be afraid to look at. They help us to see that dark and difficult times can be as much a part of the believer's experience as times of sunshine and joy.

And I think this is why the Lord has allowed this particular psalm of David to be included in the Bible. King David is not only the Lord's anointed and thus a great forerunner of the Lord Jesus.

[1 : 17] He's also a believer whose inner life is mapped out and exposed for us in great detail for our benefit. In fact, I would stick my neck out and say that there's nobody in the Old Testament whose inner life is half so clearly revealed to us as the life of David.

Even the key figures, the great figures of the early Old Testament, like Abraham and Moses, are not shown to us with anything like the rich detail that we see of David's life in the Psalms.

In fact, to read David's Psalms is rather like putting David through an MRI scanner. Do you know what I mean by an MRI scanner? I hardly know what I mean by it myself, but I think it's one of those tubes you get put in in a hospital and then somebody looks at every little tiny cross section of your body, isn't that right, and sees everything that's going on inside you and comes up with a diagnosis. Well, to read David's Psalms is like being put through a scanner. We see everything that goes on inside him. These Psalms of his are not self-indulgent outpourings.

They're not like the poetry of a 17-year-old schoolboy. These are the forthright, articulate, mature writings of a man who knew himself well and who knew God well.

[2 : 32] And David was also a sinner, and he knew that he was a sinner. And these Psalms are included in the Bible to help believers to understand the great varieties of inner experience that we go through and to be unafraid of them.

Now, if you're a young Christian, perhaps young in years or perhaps young in Christian experience, you may think that the believer's life is not supposed to have any dark corners in it.

But the Psalms help us to see that the believer's life, as it matures, has all sorts of corners in it.

These Psalms are songs of experience.

Not just bright experience and dark experience, but a whole kaleidoscope of experience. Many shades, many colours. And yet all this experience is lived out in relation to God.

This is the experience of a man who knows God and who trusts him. This is not the multicoloured experience of the agnostic. This is the multicoloured experience of a man who loves God and who turns to him even at the darkest times.

[3 : 40] Well, let's turn to the Psalm. And first of all, we'll try and see what clues King David gives us to the kind of situation that he's in. Well, clearly he is suffering in some way.

Though he doesn't tell us exactly in what way. Therefore, it's probably not going to help us much to try and link Psalm 39 with any particular episode of suffering in David's life, as it's recorded for us in the books of Samuel.

We just don't know what the traumatic experience or episode was. But David is quite clear in this Psalm that he believes his suffering has been sent to him by God as a discipline or rebuke.

So he doesn't treat his sufferings as the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. Look, for example, at verse 10, where he says, Remove your stroke from me.

It's you, God, who have stricken me or struck me. I am spent, he goes on, by the hostility of your hand. Verse 11, when you discipline a man with rebukes for sin.

[4 : 46] And look back to verse 9. It is you who have done it. So he's saying, my suffering is not a matter of chance or fate. I know, Lord, that it is you who have sent it.

Now, why has God sent David this punishment? Look at verse 11. For sin. Rebukes for sin. David realizes that he's responsible.

He's brought this trouble, this discipline, upon himself. He knows, therefore, that he can only blame himself for suffering this harsh difficulty or chastening. And let me just stick in a little word here to say that the Bible does not teach that all suffering comes as a punishment for sin.

The book of Job makes the point that great suffering can come to an innocent believer. Suffering is not necessarily a consequence of sin. But in the case of Psalm 39, David acknowledges that his particular suffering is brought about by the Lord's hand of discipline.

It's the suffering which brings this psalm into being. Now, look with me at verses 1, 2, and 3. And you'll see something more about David's personal situation. This is a very intriguing and unusual way to begin a psalm.

[6 : 02] Let me read those verses again. I said, he's looking back on a time recently in the past. 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.

So then he succeeds for a short time. 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. I had to. I couldn't hold it in for a moment longer. Now, don't those three verses suggest that the things that David is bursting to say are things that he's rather embarrassed about?

Why should he feel that it was wrong to say these things in the presence of ungodly or wicked people? Well, when you run your eye down verses 4 to 13, I think you can see why.

In verses 4, 5 and 6, he's really saying, my life is very short and meaningless. Man is not a substantial being. He's a mere shadow. And then in the later part of the psalm, he's saying, Lord, leave me alone.

[7 : 13] I can't take any more. You've chastised me more than I can bear. Cut me some slack, please. Give me at least a few moments of relaxation before my miserable life comes to an end.

Now, going back to verse 1 particularly, David imagines himself blurting out this gloomy torrent of ideas in a situation where he's being overheard by ungodly people.

And I guess that privacy would have been a very difficult thing to come by if you'd been the king of Israel in Old Testament times. I mean, think of it. Imagine yourself as King David. You'd get up in the morning and I guess a servant would be standing there passing you a dressing gown and then going next door and running your bath.

And another servant would be laying out the royal bacon and eggs in the dining room. And then as soon as you finished your breakfast, you'd be at morning prayers with a few other people. And as soon as that was over, you'd find yourself chairing a top brass staff meeting with your military commanders and your senior advisors.

You'd be discussing business and laying plans and answering people's questions. And then there'd be all sorts of odd bods coming to court, coming and going. Widows petitioning you for money.

[8 : 22] Many crooks asking you to settle some sort of dispute in their favor. And David knew, of course, that many of the people that he was regularly dealing with were not godly people.

Even his own two top generals, Joab and Abishai, were hard, ruthless men. Remember Joab and Abishai? They were brothers. They were the sons of a woman called Zeruah.

And David sometimes had to turn to them and say, You sons of Zeruah, you're too hard for me. Too difficult. They might have paid lip service to the faith of Israel, but they were not godly men. Joab certainly wasn't. So here is David, miserable and low, and wanting badly to give vent to his feelings of wretchedness. And yet he says, I will guard my mouth with a muzzle, so long as the wicked are in my presence.

Why? Because if some of these ungodly men were to overhear David saying what he does say in verses 4 to 13, they might say, Oh David, I thought you loved the Lord.

[9 : 27] I thought he brought you endless joys and satisfactions. I thought you were the apple of his eye. I thought you wrote all those songs praising him and telling him that he was wonderful. And

that you would always rejoice in him with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.

But if my ears have not misled me, I think I heard you say a moment ago, I should tell you I was just in the next room and the walls are very thin, I think I heard you ask the Lord to go away and leave you alone, because he was being beastly to you.

Chastising you, I think was the word you used. I mean, your majesty, come clean with me. Admit the game's up. You were being real there, weren't you? The real David. That's what I heard from the next room.

Miserable. Not rejoicing in the God of Israel at all. I think you ought to hold your hands up and confess that all your so-called songs of praise have been a load of claptrap.

Isn't that what lies behind verse 1? David is miserable at this point in his life. But he does love the Lord deeply and he does want to honour him, so he feels that if he speaks these words of verses 4 to 13 in the hearing of ungodly people, he will be scoring a major own goal.

[10:41] Tongues will wag all over Jerusalem. People will say that David is losing his faith and the Lord will be dishonoured. However, we see from verses 2 and 3 that David is so emotionally traumatised, he is so pent up, that in the end he simply has to speak out.

It's speak or burst with David. He's not a stiff upper lip Englishman. He's a man who has to wear his heart on his sleeve. I was mute and silent, he says in verse 2.

I held my peace, but to no avail. It was no good. My distress grew worse. My heart became hot within me. As I mused, the fire burned.

And then I spoke with my tongue. See, he's a man of emotional extremes. When David dances for joy, he's like a Scotsman at Hogmanay. But when he's wretched, he wails.

And verses 4 to 13 are an extended wail. Now let's look at these verses 4 to 13 in two sections.

[11:51] First we'll look at verses 4, 5 and 6 with this heading. David feels that his life is very short and probably meaningless. Very short, probably meaningless.

We must see that David is not speaking calmly here. He's just told us in verses 2 and 3 that he's in great distress. There's a massive internal combustion going on.

So these words of verses 4 to 13 are not the words of a calm, serene philosopher who's sitting in an armchair and gently discussing the shortness of human life with a group of admiring students who are sipping tea with him.

This is not gentle philosophy. These are the words of a man who's pacing up and down his room, wringing his hands and grimacing with mental pain. And he is saying in verse 4, Lord, I want you to help me to understand why my life is so dreadfully short.

I mean, look at it, verse 5. My life is but a few hand-breadths. Just have a look at the breadth of your hand for a moment. How broad is that? Three or four inches? What is a few inches compared with the breadth and length of the earth?

[13:04] Nothing. Nothing. In fact, David goes on in verse 5, my whole lifetime is as nothing before you. What is 70 or 80 years in your sight? Nothing.

And then he says in verse 5, surely all mankind, not just me, but all mankind stands as a mere breath. And the Hebrew word that David uses there for breath is the same word as the word used by the preacher at the beginning of the book of Ecclesiastes when he says vanity of vanities.

Everything is vanity. Breath. Empty. Meaningless. A puff of wind. It's gone. Just think of your grandparents, or if you're a younger person, your great-grandparents.

They were just as vital and full of life as we are today. They played football. They enjoyed their food. They fell in love and married.

They worked. They bought houses. They disliked the inland revenue. They listened to the wireless. But the voices that we hear in the streets today are not their voices.

[14:14] David says in verse 6, surely a man goes about as a shadow. This is David the warrior. David the slayer of Goliath. Nobody ever had quite as much red blood in his veins as David did.

But he looks at his life, at his very body, and he feels as insubstantial as a shadow. And then in the next phrase, he notices the turmoil that people live in, the turmoil that they create for themselves.

He looks around at the citizens of Israel and sees how few of them are peaceful. Almost all of them are striving and battling and plotting and planning and giving themselves stomach ulcers and nervous breakdowns because of their intense striving to create a comfortable niche for themselves.

David's Jerusalem, like any city, is a city full of conflict. Isn't it the same today? Listening to the news on the radio or the television, 95% of it is about human conflict.

Turmoil. That's David's word. And David, in the bleakness of his sufferings, uses that same word again. Vanity. Emptiness. Breath. Surely for vanity, for nothing, are they in turmoil, he says. [15:29] Of course, much of this turmoil is to do with making money. Look at verse 6. So in David's next phrase, he says, man heaps up wealth and does not know who will gather.

How clearly he understands the way things work. He sees right into the heart of Alistair Darling, doesn't he, at this point? The people of Britain, in 2009, that's us, striving and struggling to heap up just a little bit of money.

But who's going to get their hands on it in the end? Much of the money that you have earned this past week will end up going back to the government to pay off our eye-watering national debt. You might just about manage to hang on to enough of it to buy yourself a pair of trousers. But most of it will go back to Mr. Darling and his many successors over the next 10 or 20 years.

Who will gather the money that we heap up? Verses 4 to 6 could almost come straight out of the book of Ecclesiastes. Vanity. Empty. Lord, tell me why things are like this.

[16:34] That's David's cry. Now friends, stay in your seats. Don't head for the door. Don't leave. I know this is a dark psalm, but God did not put it in the Bible in order for it not to be read.

It's here for a very good purpose and I hope we will see what that purpose is in a few minutes' time. There will be some comfort, I promise you. But just hang on. I ought perhaps to make a confession at this point.

I decided to preach on this psalm about four weeks or so ago because I've known it for many years and always found it a very poignant psalm and I've never preached on it. But when I began my serious preparation about one week ago, I realised what a very difficult psalm it was.

And I nearly changed my mind and picked a different psalm. The leaflet hadn't gone to press at that stage and I could have done. I nearly wimped out. And do you know, I had to give myself a dressing down.

I said to myself, Edward, you teach the Cornhill Training Corps students that there are no no-go areas in the Bible. You insist to those students that every chapter of the Bible is preachable and now you're threatening to throw in the towel on Psalm 39.

[17:46] So stop whinging, man, and get on with your preparation. I had to kick myself. Now I'm glad I did because there is comfort here. There is a reason for this psalm being here. But we must keep engaging with David's mind and with his pain before we get to the comfort.

So there's the first point. To David, life seems very short and probably meaningless. And now second, from the last part of the psalm, David begs the Lord to leave him alone.

Now we noticed earlier that David is not pretending that he is innocent of sin. He's not thinking of himself as another Job, an innocent sufferer.

He's not saying to God, therefore, your discipline is unfair. No, he's acknowledging his sinfulness. It's there in verse 8. He says, deliver me from all my transgressions.

It's there in the first part of verse 11 as well. He's acknowledging that God is disciplining him by rebuking him for sins. So he's not saying that he's not guilty. But what he is saying in these verses is, please, Lord, stop.

[18:57] Your chastisement of me is deserved, but I can't take any more. He's a bit like a man preparing to be flogged, whose arms and legs have been pinned down so that the man whipping him should be able to get the lash down on him.

And as the lash falls again and again, he turns to the man who's whipping him and he says, please, stop. I can't take any more. Look at verse 10. Remove your stroke from me. Stop striking me.

I'm spent. I'm exhausted by the hostility of your hand. And then verse 11. When you discipline a man like this, you eat up the very fabric of his life as a moth eats the clothes in the cupboard.

You're making my once vigorous life as weak as a moth-eaten pullover. Mankind is a mere breath. There's that word vanity again. And then finally, we have those heart-wrenching words in verses 12 and 13.

Hear me, Lord. Notice my tears. Don't turn a deaf ear to my cry. I am, after all, nothing but a sojourner, a man who passes through and doesn't stay long.

[20:04] So please, look away from me. Give me a break. Turn your attention elsewhere for a while so that I can have just a few brief moments to relax and smile before I depart and I'm gone.

Well, how are we supposed to assess all this what are we to make of it? Should we quickly close our Bibles now and creep out of church with a hang-dog expression on our faces and say to each

other, dear, oh, dear, that psalm shouldn't be in the Bible at all.

It's so gloomy and negative. David was probably having a breakdown when he wrote it. It's nothing but the outpourings of a disordered, diseased mind. Surely the Holy Spirit couldn't have inspired such unfortunate words.

Well, what does the Apostle Paul say about the Old Testament in 2 Timothy? He says this, All Scripture, barring Psalm 39, is inspired by God and is profitable.

Oh, no, he doesn't. He says all Scripture, all of the Old Testament, is inspired by God. Psalm 39, therefore, is God-breathed Scripture. It's the work of the Holy Spirit through the mind and pen of David.

[21 : 20] it's here for a purpose and that purpose is for our profit and our benefit. So let me try and open up some lines of thought which I hope will help us to see how this psalm is such a help to Christian people.

We need to see that what David is expressing here is deeply true at one level but is not true at another level.

There are two main ways in which what David is saying here is not true. First, his assessment of the life of man as being a mere breath or a shadow or vanity is not true to the teaching of Scripture.

The life of mankind, think of it, is the crowning glory of God's creation. The account of the creation that we have in Genesis 1 and 2 makes it clear that once God had made everything, the universe, the planets, the stars, the sun and moon and the earth and had then clothed the earth with the oceans and continents and vegetation and animals and birds and fish, he then made a creature. This was the crowning glory. A creature that was different categorically from everything he had hitherto made because this new creature, this final creature, was made in his image.

[22 : 41] It bore the very likeness and stamp of himself and this was mankind, male and female. Men and women are not vanity and emptiness.

We reflect the glorious nature of the living God who tenderly leaned over the figure of Adam, our first forefather and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.

But more than that, when we had rebelled, when we had turned our backs on God and had wickedly gone our own way and had opted for self-government, God did not reject us contemptuously or treat us as worthless.

On the contrary, so much did he value us, so much did he desire to share his heavenly home with us forever that he put into action his great rescue plan which involved the sacrifice of his beloved son.

If our life was truly worthless, he would never have done that. He would never have allowed nails to be driven into Christ's hands and feet. He would never have allowed soldiers to mock him and crown him with thorns.

[23 : 49] That's how much our lives are worth in the sight of God. If you're ever despairing about your life, if you ever get to the point of thinking that your life is worthless, think of the cross.

That's how much you're valued by the Lord God. Human life is not a vain shadow. It's not a meaningless breath. The glory of our creation and the costliness of our rescue show us how much God values us.

And then the second way in which David is mistaken is his wish, particularly as he expresses it in verse 13, that God should turn away from him or look away.

As if happiness and smiles will come to him when he's apart from God and not with God. Look away from me that I may smile again is what he says. Now the Bible counters that kind of thinking everywhere, on almost every page.

The Bible's teaching is that to be separated from God, for God to look away, is death. And to be separated ultimately and eternally from God is hell. The glory of the Gospel is that it reunites sinners with the God from whom we have been separated.

[25 : 03] You remember how Paul says triumphantly in Romans chapter 8 that no power in all creation will be able to separate Christians from the love of God which is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Now David knows all this just as well as the Apostle Paul knows it. Just look back a page to Psalm 38 and verse 21. Just two verses back.

Do not forsake me, O Lord. O my God, be not far from me. Now that verse directly contradicts verse 13 in the psalm that we're looking at.

Or look on a page to Psalm 41 verse 12. Second half of the verse, 41-12. You have set me in your presence forever.

Now that's where David wants to be. That's where he knows it's the place of blessing and joy. So when he says in Psalm 39 verse 13, look away from me that I may smile again.

[26 : 04] He is speaking out of kilter with what he really knows and believes about God. We must also remember the covenant, the great promise that the Lord God had made with David.

It's recorded for us in 2 Samuel chapter 7 which is a critically important chapter for understanding David's place in the history of Israel. In that chapter, 2 Samuel 7, the Lord says this to David through his friend the prophet Nathan.

He says, I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, that you should be prince over my people Israel. And I have been with you wherever you went and have cut off all your enemies from before you.

And I will make for you a great name like the name of the great ones of the earth. And then the Lord a few verses later concludes his promise by telling David that he will establish his throne and his kingly line forever.

Now David knew all this when he wrote Psalm 39. He knew that he was the linchpin in God's purposes for Israel. He knew that he would father a royal line, a royal household that would rule forever.

[27 : 14] And yet he is still able to write these things in Psalm 39 which at one level are clearly untrue. At what level then is Psalm 39 true?

Why has the Holy Spirit included this Psalm in the Old Testament if it is so much out of line with the Bible's teaching about the value of mankind and the desirability of being close to God?

I think the reason is this, that God is lovingly showing us that even the staunchest believers, even the most vital believers, go through episodes in life that are so painful, so difficult, that they are forced to say this kind of thing.

We must read this Psalm 39 in the context of the whole of David's writings in the Psalms. We know from so many others of the Psalms what he really believed about God and it's not what he expresses here in this Psalm.

But God has allowed us to have this Psalm and to read this Psalm so as to show us the truth about the dark experiences that even the most mature believers can go through.

[28 : 30] If David had been held up to us as a man who faced all of life's pressures with serene calmness at every stage and peaceful joy, I think we would despair.

But thank God David is not like that. His life is an emotional rollercoaster and at Psalm 39 he is at the bottom of the track.

He's almost suicidal here. He's almost on the parapet of the Kingston Bridge here looking down into the dark waters of the river and thinking about jumping off. Verses 4 and 5 are almost saying I want to end it all.

Lord, my life is so worthless and short. What is the point of my going on? Psalm 39 is almost a phone call to the Samaritans. But God allows us to see the rollercoaster of David's inner life in the Psalms to show us that this is what the believer's life is really like.

Much of David's life is full of boldness and joy and trust and energy. But he had these dark, dark moments and this is recorded for our benefit.

[29 : 42] So let me make one simple suggestion and that is that we remember that this psalm is here for a rainy day.

Your life might be all sunshine and rosebuds at the moment especially if you're young and in good health and you have a naturally cheerful temperament. But there will be dark days ahead and very difficult episodes.

There may be periods when you feel just like David under so much burden and difficulty that you feel you cannot go on. Times when you look at your life and wonder if it has any value at all.

Times when you feel like asking God to leave the room. Now let's remember therefore that this psalm is here. All of us will need it sooner or later.

In this psalm God gives us permission to feel wretched when the pressures of life are really strong upon us. Now there is a ray of hope even in this bleak psalm.

[30 : 48] Did you see it in verse 7? And now oh Lord for what do I wait? What does that question really mean? I think it must mean where do I turn at this point?

Is there any silver lining? And then we get a sudden shaft of light, a bright little gleam of what David really knows and believes. Just those five short words there in verse 7.

My hope is in you. In the midst of his despair he remembers the truth. He remembers that God and God alone is the one to trust.

So friends let's not forget that this psalm 39 is here in the Bible. Let's read it when we're troubled and we will be if we haven't been already.

And let's particularly take a red pen and underline verse 7. And now O Lord for what do I wait? My hope is in you.

[31 : 55] Let's bow our heads and we'll pray together. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Romans, May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.

Our gracious Father, we do thank you for this Psalm 39, this dark, difficult Psalm and we dare to thank you dear Father that King David, your servant went through such a kaleidoscope of different emotions in his life.

Times of great joy and celebration and trust and thanksgiving and then these hard, hard times when he felt that you deserted him or were being fiercely unkind to him and he couldn't understand why he had to go on enduring it.

We do pray for any who are here this evening who feel like this at the moment that you will tenderly have mercy upon them and give them great encouragements and for all of us dear Father we pray that you'll help us not to be afraid of life and of the different things that it brings to us but to know that like David the King we're able to go through life with all its ups and downs and put our trust and our hope in you and all this we ask in Jesus name Amen