

IS YOUR HOPE IN THE LORD?

PSALM 39

INTRODUCTION:

Psalm 39 was written by David. We don't know when he wrote it, or exactly why he wrote it, but it is obviously a very personal psalm that David wrote when he was undergoing extreme suffering. Here, David honestly lets us into his heart, his struggles, his questions, and his faith as he suffers.

It may have been a sickness or other physical ailment, or perhaps something else; but whatever it was, it was so intense that David felt like his life might not last much longer. As we will see here, David comes face to face with his own mortality. He contemplates his death, which feels like it is coming sooner rather than later. And where does this intense suffering and pain come from? According to David himself, he is being chastened or disciplined by God for his sin.

Not all our suffering comes from our sin. In fact, in the Bible, it is often the opposite. God's people have a long history of suffering for righteousness sake, for obedience to His Word and allegiance to His name, for preaching the Gospel of His Son. When that occurs, the Scriptures—including Jesus, Himself—tells us we are blessed. But sometimes we suffer because of our sin. God does not let His children get away with it. He did this with David, and He still does it to us today.

Because God loves His people and hates sin, He will discipline us in various ways. But, as Hebrews 12 teaches, He disciplines His children as a perfect, loving Father; therefore, His discipline is always for our good, to lead us to repentance, and for our growth. But sometimes His discipline can be painful.

Main idea: What Psalm 39 teaches us is that in the midst of the painful discipline of the Lord, we must see ourselves for who we are and remember that He is our only hope for forgiveness, restoration, and joy.

In the midst of intense suffering under God's discipline, David does three things that will help us when we go through suffering and confusion and will help us to help others in their times of distress and doubt.

- A. Suffering silently under God's discipline (*vv.1-3*)
- B. Thinking soberly about life's brevity (*vv.4-6*)
- C. Praying confidently to God, our only hope (*vv.7-13*)

EXPOSITION:

A. Suffering silently under God's discipline (*vv.1-3*)

1. His resolve to refrain from sin (*vv.1-2*)

David is experiencing God's chastening, or discipline, for his sin. He is going through something of an inner turmoil, which threatens to boil over. So, he decided he had to control himself in the

company of unbelievers, so that he, himself, did not sin in light of the inward pain he was suffering. He had to “**guard**” his ways—his whole manner of life.

In particular, He seems to have had an awareness of his own weaknesses and tendencies to not be able to control his tongue (*James 1:26*). So, he muzzles himself; he does not allow himself to speak. It seems that he was afraid that if he spoke of what he was experiencing from God, it might come out as complaining about God or dishonor God in some way, or perhaps be misinterpreted by unbelievers. He did not want to bring reproach upon God, so he zipped his lip.

- **Proverbs 17:27-28**—He who restrains his words has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding. ²⁸ Even a fool, when he keeps silent, is considered wise; When he closes his lips, he is considered prudent.

But apparently, David’s fear of sinning in his speech led him even to refrain even from speaking good things. *“I was mute and silent; I refrained even from good” (v.2).*

His vow of silence was total. He not only refrained from saying bad things, he refrained from even saying anything good. He went one step further than the adage, “If you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say anything at all.” He just went with the second part, “Don’t say anything at all.” For David, a vow not to say anything in the presence of the wicked was the only way he could make sure he did not say something irreverent or sinful that his enemies could then use against him.

He seems to have had good intentions with this vow. He did not want to sin and so displease and dishonor God and hurt his own testimony. It’s a commendable intention. He put God’s glory first, and he guarded his tongue. We would all do well to think more and speak less; to refrain from speaking the first things that come into our minds without thinking about how those words might affect others or our witness for Christ.

- **James 3:8**—But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison.

All this being said, it’s one thing to guard your speech and to think before you speak, but it’s another thing to stop speaking altogether and take a vow of silence as you suffer. When you go to that extreme, you not only deprive yourself of opportunities to bear witness of the greatness of God and encourage others, you also turn all of your thoughts and emotions inward. And David tells us what the result of that is in verse 3—my sorrow grew worse.

2. His increasing sorrow and frustration (v.3)

“**Sorrow**” here is his literal pain; his anguish. His inner suffering simply increased. It compounded. He says that his heart grew hot within him. When he thought about his situation and his suffering, “the fire burned.” The language here is extremely vivid. His inner thoughts and emotions were like the magma beneath the volcano, bubbling and rising, increasing in pressure (*Cf. Jer.20:9*). Finally, he could not keep silent any longer, and he vocalizes his thoughts.

What does he say? Does he shout out that God is unjust in His chastening? Does He go off on the ungodly around him? No, instead he goes straight to God with deep questions about life.

B. Thinking soberly about life's brevity (vv.4-6)

1. The brevity of life (vv.4-6a)

In his extreme suffering, David inevitably thinks about his own mortality. When he asks God to make him know his end and the extent of his days, he is not asking God for a calendar date for his death. Rather, in his suffering, he asks how much more of this do I have to endure. He feels death closing in quickly.

It is common for those who suffer badly, often for an extended period of time, to think about their death. When things are going well for you—good health, good job, good family—life feels long and blessed. But when suffering comes (physical, mental, or emotional) and stays for a while, suddenly you are very mortal, and life is very short.

We start to get a better understanding of this also as we age. As a young child, I remember 20 minutes felt like an hour; an hour felt like half the day; a day like a week; and a month felt like a year. But as I have gotten into my middle-aged years, I feel the exact opposite. A year seems to go by in a month; a month in a week; a week in a day. In the grand perspective of history, my life and your life are just a speck.

God has made his days as handbreadths. Jeremiah 52:21 tells us that this measurement is four fingers thick; one of the smallest units of measurement used in Israel. We think that someone living to 100 is absolutely ancient. This is someone living "at his best," "standing firm" to a ripe old age (v.5c). Yet, David here reminds us that, compared to the eternal God, 100 years is nothing.

The mayfly has the shortest lifespan of any animal on earth, usually living their entire lives—from birth to full maturity—in less than 24 hours. It is hard for us to imagine that. They are literally here today and gone tomorrow. Compared to God, we are mayflies; even less than mayflies from a temporal perspective, because God is eternal. We are, as David says, like phantoms, or like shadows with no real substance; hardly here at all. We are a "mere breath." Interestingly, the word translated "breath" here is actually the same word used over and over again in Ecclesiastes and translated as "vanity" or "meaningless." In his suffering, David wonders whether his short, pain-filled life is meaningless.

2. The futility of riches (v.6b)

He continues this line of thinking. What is life all about, anyway? What are people doing all around him? They "**make an uproar**," running around busily seeking to accumulate money and more and more stuff. But what's it all for in the end? Nothing (v.6). We amass riches, and then we die, and then what becomes of them?

Jesus exposed the foolishness of this kind of worldly thinking in Luke 12:16-21.

- **Luke 12:16-21**—And He told them a parable, saying, “The land of a rich man was very productive. ¹⁷ And he began reasoning to himself, saying, ‘What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?’ ¹⁸ Then he said, ‘This is what I will do: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. ¹⁹ And I will say to my soul, “Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry.” ²⁰ But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?’ ²¹ So is the man who stores up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.”

We need to be reminded of our mortality. We need to remember how “transient” we are. We need to recognize that we are frail and fleeting; that our lives come and go in the divine blink of an eye.

- **Psalms 90:12**—So teach us to number our days, that we may present to You a heart of wisdom.

Why is it good to be reminded of the brevity of life?

- So that we don’t think of ourselves as independent and self-sufficient. We are 100% dependent upon God for our physical existence every second of every minute of every hour of every day of every year that we live.
- So that we redeem the short time we are given in service and obedience to God.
 - **Ephesians 5:15-16**—Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, ¹⁶ making the most of your time, because the days are evil.

We hear stories about people who have been informed by doctors that they only have a few months to live. And they decide then that they are going to live life to the fullest by doing all the things they were scared to do, or too busy to do, before. Christians should also have the mindset that we have limited time. Because our lives are short, and because the days are evil, we need to take advantage of all the opportunities God gives us to serve Him, to make disciples, to do good to all people, especially those of the household of faith (*Gal.6:10*).

So, David suffers silently under God’s discipline until he can no longer take it. Then, his intense suffering causes him to think soberly about the brevity of his own life, and life, in general. But now he comes to a turning point in the psalm, which is signaled by the words “**and now**” or “**but now.**” Here we see a bit of light peaking through the clouds as David prays confidently to God, our only hope.

C. Praying confidently to God, our only hope (vv.7-13)

He asks, “**And now, Lord, for what do I wait?**” Unbelievers look for answers to pain and suffering and death everywhere but the right place. They make idols of careers, money, and self-esteem. They look to others to come to their aid and deliver them. They indulge in alcohol and drugs to numb their pain, but only end up increasing it. To the world, true, unshakable, rock-solid hope doesn’t exist. Or, if it does exist, it can never be obtained.

But here, David's faith shines through the darkness—"My hope is in You" (v.7b). In his suffering, in his silence, in his pondering about life, David's faith has remained intact. He knows where to find hope. Hope lies in one place, in one being—God, and God alone. For God is the only one who can deliver him.

1. He is our hope for forgiveness. (vv.7-11)

David immediately connects his hope in God to God's ability to deliver him from his sins—"Deliver me from all my transgressions" (v.8).

He knows that his suffering and pain are consequences of his sin. Therefore, deliverance from his suffering means deliverance from his sins. We saw in Psalm 38 how sin can have devastating physical and psychological effects. And here again, David knows that his pain and suffering are connected with his sin. He knows that he desperately needs forgiveness and reconciliation with God. Nothing else will suffice. Without forgiveness, he is doomed. And so are we.

And thank God that He has made a way of forgiveness to us all.

- **Acts 5:30-31**—The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom you had put to death by hanging Him on a cross.³¹ He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins.
- **Acts 10:42-43**—And He ordered us to preach to the people, and solemnly to testify that this is the One who has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead.⁴³ Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins.
- **Acts 13:36-38**—For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep, and was laid among his fathers and underwent decay;³⁷ but He whom God raised did not undergo decay.³⁸ Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through Him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you.
- **Colossians 1:13-14**—For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son,¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

This poses a question to the unbeliever listening to this: What are you going to do with your sin? The Bible says that if you hold on to it, you will die in it. And you cannot get rid of it through your own efforts. It is stuck to you—embedded in you—and no amount of good deeds, or church attendance, or baptisms can remove your sins from you. As each of those verses say, there is only one way to be saved from your sin, and it is through trusting in Jesus Christ, the beloved Son of God. In Him, there is forgiveness. Jesus Christ is hope; the only hope; your only hope.

Because God is David's hope, he asks God to deliver him from his transgressions and the discipline he has incurred (v.8). He asks God to "**remove Your plague from me**" (v.10). Yet, he does not presume to order God around. He knows that he does not deserve forgiveness. He knows that God is right to discipline him.

Verses 9-11 show us that David seems to have learned something compared to where he was at the beginning of this psalm. Once again, he is silent—"I have become mute, I do not open my mouth" (v.9).

But his reason for keeping his mouth shut here is different than before. Before, he kept quiet for fear that he might complain against God for his suffering. Now, he keeps quiet because he understands that his suffering is God's doing—God's disciplining hand—and it is right. "You (emphatic) have done it."

In verse 11, he generalizes the statement:

- **Psalm 39:11**—With reproofs You chasten a man for iniquity; You consume as a moth what is precious to him; Surely every man is a mere breath.

All of God's children, including you and me, are subject to God's disciplining hand for our iniquities. And part of God's discipline is to "consume as a moth what is precious to him." Why would God consume what is precious to us? Because so often, the things that are precious to us detract our love and affection from God. In his discipline, God will put His finger on those things in our lives that we start to value above Him—those things that are precious to us. Those things seem harmless, even good (e.g., money, home, job, reputation, status, family); yet when we value them above the Lord, they become idols to us.

David came to the point of submission to God's will, even in His discipline. He knew that God's discipline ultimately was for his good. He knew that God needed to consume those "precious things" in his life. Have you come to that point? Do you recognize that God's will is best, not yours? Ultimately, our hope should be in the character and wisdom of God, not in what we think is best for us or others. Can we sing the old song?:

Have thine own way, Lord! Have thine own way!
Thou art the potter, I am the clay.
Mold me and make me after thy will,
while I am waiting, yielded, and still.

Have thine own way, Lord! Have thine own way!
Hold o'er my being absolute sway.
Fill with thy Spirit till all shall see
Christ only, always, living in me!¹

Only those who know the forgiveness of God can sing this song and mean it; because the forgiveness of God goes hand in hand with submission to God. If you know God's forgiveness, then your life belongs to Him to will and to work for His good pleasure.

God is our hope for forgiveness.

2. He is our hope for restoration (v.12)

In David's final petition, he asks God to hear him; to give ear to his cry; to not be silent at his tears. He is pleading with God to hear him and restore him. He says that he is a "**stranger**" with God and a

¹ Adelaide A. Pollard, *Have Thine Own Way, Lord* (1906)

“sojourner like all my fathers.” In ancient Israel, a sojourner was an alien in the land—a passing guest. They lacked most of the rights of the permanent inhabitants of the land and so they were dependent on others for permission to live in certain places and have access to land and water. In fact, God called the nation of Israel “sojourners.”

- **Leviticus 25:23**—the land is Mine; for you are but aliens and sojourners with Me.

David here identifies with his ancestors. He is part of that same covenant community. He is saying that he belongs to God, as they did, and that he depends completely on God, as they did. He is a broken man, and so he is casting himself on God’s mercy for restoration.

Trials, tribulations, or intense physical or emotional suffering can seem to cripple us. And sometimes, that’s exactly what God’s discipline is for. Sometimes we have to be hurt before we can be healed; broken before we can be restored.

- **Hosea 6:1-2**—Come, let us return to the LORD. For He has torn us, but He will heal us; He has wounded us, but He will bandage us. ² He will revive us after two days; He will raise us up on the third day, that we may live before Him.

God is our hope for restoration.

3. He is our hope for renewed joy. (v.13)

Sin often has the effect of setting up a barrier, or a distance between you and God, so that you feel distant from Him. And the more distant we feel from God, the less joy we have in our hearts and lives.

David felt this distance and joylessness deeply. You may be feeling this distance and joylessness deeply. Ask yourself first, where is my suffering coming from? Again, not all suffering is the result of sin, but sometimes it really is. God simply will not tolerate persistent sin in His children. He cannot do so and still be a loving and holy Father. But, because He is a loving and holy Father, He disciplines us for our good. Sometimes His discipline is hard, yet, for His children, it is necessary to lead us to repentance, to change us, to mold us. We must examine our hearts and our lives to see if there is unrepentant sin, and then we must be quick and thorough to kill it and to make no more provision for it. God will not tolerate it.

David felt God’s discipline intently. It caused him such anguish that he was faced with his own frailty and mortality, and the brevity of his own life. Yet, he did not lash out at God as an uncaring deity, nor complain to others about the unfairness of life. He took his pain to the very One who was disciplining him. He took his pain to his loving Father, the only one who could deliver him.

In the midst of suffering and pain that comes about from our sin, it is not wrong to seek help from a brother or sister in Christ. They can be helpful; they can pray with you; they can give counsel. But in the end, they cannot deliver you. There is only one Deliverer, one Hope, and it is the triune God.

Take your pain, your questions, your anxieties to your heavenly Father through His Son, Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit. He does not promise to immediately remove His discipline, but you can rest assured that as you trust Him in it, He will work in you to grow you and to mold you more and more into the image of His beloved Son, Jesus.

I asked the Lord that I might grow
in faith and love and ev'ry grace;
might more of His salvation know,
and seek more earnestly His face.

'Twas He who taught me thus to pray,
and He, I trust, has answered pray'r,
but it has been in such a way
as almost drove me to despair.

I hoped that in some favored hour
at once He'd answer my request,
and by His love's constraining pow'r
subdue my sins and give me rest.

Instead of this He made me feel
the hidden evils of my heart,
and let the angry pow'rs of hell
assault my soul in ev'ry part.

Yea more, with His own hand He seemed
intent to aggravate my woe,
crossed all the fair designs I schemed,
humbled my heart, and laid me low.

"Lord, why is this?" I, trembling, cried;
"Wilt thou pursue thy worm to death?"
"Tis in this way," the Lord replied,
"I answer prayer for grace and faith.

"These inward trials I employ
from self and pride to set thee free,
and break thy schemes of earthly joy
that thou may'st find thy all in Me."²

Amen.

² John Newton, Prayer Answered by Crosses (1779)

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