

# Psalm 39

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[0:00] Let me start my timer for accountability. One of the, I think I've heard, I haven't had this experience, I've heard one of the liabilities is if you don't preach to a group of people or teach often, you're tempted to say everything you think you could say.

I'm not going to do that this morning. So, hence the timer as well. But Psalm 39. Let's read this together. For the director of music, for Jedithun, the Psalm of David, I said, I will watch my ways and keep my tongue from sin.

I will put a muzzle on my mouth while in the presence of the wicked. So I remained utterly silent, not even saying anything good. But my anguish increased.

My heart grew hot within me. While I meditated, the fire burned. Then I spoke with my tongue.

Show me, Lord. My life's end and the number of my days.

Let me know how fleeting my life is. You have made my days a mere hand breath. The span of my years is nothing before you. Everyone is but a breath. Even those who seem secure.

[1:14] Surely everyone goes around like a mere phantom. In vain they rush about. Keeping up wealth without knowing whose it will finally be. 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 from me.

I am overcome by the blow of your hand. When you rebuke and discipline anyone for their sin, you consume their wealth like a moth. Surely everyone is but a breath. Hear my prayer, Lord.

Listen to my cry for help. Do not be deaf to my weeping. I dwell with you as a foreigner, a stranger, as all my ancestors were. Look away from me that I may enjoy life again before I depart and I am no more.

This is the word of the Lord. Let's pray one more time. God, we pray specifically that through your Holy Spirit, you would open your word to us.

[2:17] We would see your grace. We would see Christ more clearly, and we would be transformed by your love. We just ask this in Christ's name. Amen. So Psalm 39, the thesis statement here would be that God reminds us, Psalm 39 reminds us of the need for God's grace, and that because of God's grace, we can trust God with our days.

Now, it seems like human nature, that we go back and forth between one extreme and the other. We recapitulate one way or the other. In my passport country of the United States, we see this politically.

You're either, and don't worry, this is the only political statement I'll make, you're either Republican or Democrat, and if you're anything in between, it's odd, it's strange. You're either good guys or bad guys. That's kind of how human nature goes.

And maybe to make a point, to demonstrate that this is human nature, when one of my sons was five years old, he'll remain nameless, when he was five years old, he told me that he was a lot like his mom, and that his brother was a lot like me.

So I was curious what he meant. I said, what do you mean, buddy, in what way? And he said, well, mom and I, we care about everything, and you and my brother don't care about anything.

[3:33] And I was like, well, you might be, I think you're overstating it a little bit. Try to convince him it wasn't quite that simple, is how he saw the world. That tends to be how we see things.

You're either this or you're that. And that's how Psalm 39 starts out to us. What we see in Psalm 39 is we see the irreligious, and we see the religious.

But what we'll see as we go through the Psalm is that neither irreligion nor religion is good enough.

What we need to experience is the grace of God. The irreligious are those who have the organizing

principle of their life is that they look at the claims of religion, and they just try to do the opposite. Now, if you're that person and you're here today, I'm very thankful for you here, why you're here. I'm not sure why you came. Maybe a friend invited you. Maybe you do have some questions around the ultimate meaning or purpose in life, and you want some of those questions to get answered. I hope they get answered for you today. And I would love for you to come back. But I think one thing for you to consider, if that's you, is that even though you might have an irreligious identity, in a way, you're still using religion as an operating principle or value of your life because it's still set as the authority.

[ 4 : 48 ] So the operating principle or value behind your religion is in fact religion or religious worldview. Now, most of us here today would probably identify with a main character of the psalm, and that's a religious person.

Let's look again at the attributes of a religious person. Look at verses one to three, a little more detail here. So verses one to three, I'll read them again. I said, I will watch my ways and keep my tongue from sin.

I will put a muzzle on my mouth while in the presence of the wicked. So I remained utterly silent, not even saying anything good. But my anguish increased. My heart grew hot within me.

While I meditated, the fire burned. Then I spoke with my tongue. The voice of the psalmist is a religious person. They are the opposite of what is described as the wicked in verse one.

The reason for the psalmist's silence is he's watching those who have organized their lives, the operating principle of their life is to not glorify God, to not do what God wants. So he's religious, and we see him remaining silent in the company of those who do not want to glorify God.

[ 5 : 58 ] Now, we can understand him. We understand that interjecting ourselves into a situation, particularly a big systematic thing, and speaking out against it often bears no results.

So we're much like the psalmist. It's like, let's just be faithful. Let's have good marriages. Let's keep our heads down. Let's work hard. Let's do what's right.

We can't really blame the psalmist. We can understand the situation he's in as we find ourselves in the same situation. But I think the difference here, his silence is not the silence of wisdom.

Rather, it's a form of religious self-justification. It's a form of spiritual pride. In the religious person, you see this outward conformity to God's law, but an inward, in the inside, he's bent away from God, just as the irreligious is.

He looks at the irreligious, and he's jealous of where they're at. And we ask the question, what's so bad about keeping silent? Silence is not always bad, but in this case, it's the psalmist.

[ 7 : 05 ] He's sulking before God is the reason for his silence. And that runs contrary to what we're commanded in Scripture. Stephen preached on this in November, our Thanksgiving service, 1 Thessalonians 5, 16 to 18.

Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. As a Christian remaining silent before God, failing to offer gratitude, failing to pray, failing to give thanks, is not just an oversight.

It is a way of rejecting God. The psalmist is using an appearance of religion as a way of rejecting God, and he needs the grace of God just as much as the irreligious person does.

The psalmist wishes he had the results of the irreligious. He sees their prosperity and thinks, this following God stuff is just not for me. It's too hard. We know this because when the psalmist speaks, he does not speak to the irreligious, but to God about the condition of his own heart.

So he sees what's happening with the irreligious, and he's jealous, he's bitter, he's upset, and he's got this fire burning within him. We might naturally think that the first people he goes and speaks to is the irreligious, but we know it's jealousy because when he speaks, he confesses what's on the inside to God.

[ 8 : 25 ] Now, Psalm 39 does not describe the mechanics of how the grace of God works exactly, but it shows us what happens when people experience the grace of God. The psalmist moves from a self-justifying silent protest to speaking to God and acknowledging the fact that he needs to be rescued.

Look again at verses 3 to 7 with me. Verse 3. My heart grew hot within me. While I meditated, the fire burned. Then I spoke with my tongue. Show me, Lord, my life's end, the number of my days. Let me know how fleeting my life is. You have made my days a mere hand-breath. The span of my years is as nothing before you. Everyone is but a breath, even those who seem secure.

Surely everyone goes around like a mere phantom. In vain they rush about, heaping up wealth, without knowing whose it will finally be. But now, Lord, what do I look for? My hope is in you. When the religious experience is the grace of God, you see they speak to God before speaking to anyone else. And they have experienced conviction from God, then they speak to God in humility, confessing the jealousy and lack of trust they have in their own heart.

[ 9 : 36 ] When you encounter the grace of God, it's the realization that what is wrong with the world is not primarily what is out there. It's actually what's in here. So how do you know if you experience grace?

It's simply that. It's when I look at the world and I see what's wrong, do I see something inside me or do I see something outside of me? If you've experienced the grace of God and there's an offense that takes place in your life, a place that you would look would be inward.

Someone might do something to wrong you or short words or cut you off in traffic or something mean. But that should cause us to look inward, not outward.

So when a boss or coworker or spouse offends you, the first place you look is not to them and not what they have done. But you look, you bring your own heart before the Lord and ask the Lord, is there anything in my own heart that is offensive before you?

Grace is necessary whether you have an irreligious or religious identity or background. And the evidence of this grace is that we first speak to God with humility about ourselves before we speak to anyone else.

[ 10 : 46 ] It's a recognition that what's wrong with the world is me before it's anything else. Point two, so that was, sorry, I should have said my point so you could track with me.

So point one was we need to experience the grace of God. Point two, because we have experienced the grace of God, the psalmist shows us we can trust God with our days. There are two areas in which the psalm points out that we are tempted not to trust God and that's with wealth and time.

Now, when you read the Bible, if you read the Bible and you often go, huh, that's a nice story or I feel good or I feel good about myself and this makes me feel warm inside, there's a good chance you might not be reading the Bible correctly.

So, let me explain. By analogy, I think the Bible is a little bit like going to a physical therapist. Now, over the years, I've either, through, you know, doing something foolish or just trying to, you know, be not middle-aged, done some things, tweaked some things, and I'll go to the physio and be like, hey, I've got this pain, it's right back here.

And what a good physio will do is they'll start to put their hands on you and they'll start to work around and they'll find some sensitive spots you didn't know you had. And I usually am like Dr. Google and I'm like, yeah, it's here.

[ 12 : 05 ] And then they're working on my neck and I'm like, hey, I said it's back there. And they're like, no, no, it's actually here. Like, they know what they're doing. I think that should be what your experience reading the Bible is like.

Is when you read the Bible, if you feel like it's not regularly pushing on some sensitive spots in your life, you're probably not reading the Bible correctly. And that's what we have here in Psalm 39. We often come to God with a perceived problem. I go to the physio and I say, hey, I think this is the problem. The physio finds the real problem. It's a much bigger, much more structural, much more systematic issue.

For example, I worked with a student ministry and this last year, one of the students on campus we'd met, he wanted to, he was interested in joining a Bible study because he recognized that he had some problems and the Bible has some wisdom and has some answers for him, which is true. But what he didn't realize and maybe the news he wasn't quite ready for is that you just don't have some problems. The Bible actually says you are the problem. Like, it's a much bigger issue than you have some problems.

[ 13 : 12 ] And let's consider the anxiety of wealth. Why is the world so obsessed with pursuing wealth? Because wealth represents a form of security that only God can provide.

We spend an inordinate amount of time thinking about the thing, invested in the thing that brings wealth, our jobs. To prove the point here, there is 168 hours in a week.

If you work 60 hours a week, which is a good chunk of your week, you still have 56 hours to sleep that week. That's eight hours a night, which is a lot, especially at, you know, my life stage.

Or if you have younger kids in the house, it's 56 hours of sleep a week. It's eight hours a night. You still have another 52 hours left in the week. Now, it doesn't feel like that. It feels like the thing we do most of the time is work.

And there's plenty of reasons why work dominates our emotional capacity beyond obsessing about making the ends meet or wealth. Workplace relationships, a boss that doesn't have boundaries, disrupts your family time, recreation time, Sabbath days.

[14:21] But often, our obsession with wealth can be that, our obsession with work can be an obsession with wealth and gaining wealth. The point of wealth and work is not that we would live lives of greater comfort, but that we fulfill what God sets out in his purpose of life for us, to love him and to love our neighbor.

Jesus tells a very short parable, which I'll read, in Luke 12, which illustrates Psalm 39's futility of wealth. And he told them this parable, the ground of a certain man yielded an abundant harvest. He thought to himself, what shall I do? I have no place to store my crops. Then he said, this is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. And I'll say to myself, you have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy, eat, drink, and be merry. But God said to him, you fool, this very night your life will be demanded of you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself? This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich towards God. The man did not have him view the love of God and the love of neighbor with his wealth, but rather an easy life.

[15:42] Let's eat, drink, and be merry. Before the Lord, it's foolish to make wealth the ultimate aim in our lives. If we were going to live forever on earth, then the accumulation of wealth makes sense, but we won't.

This is one of the chief problems of wealth. At a certain point, wealth creates an illusion of security. People often come to God about wealth desiring security that wealth can provide, which is temporary.

And what we really need is security that we gain from our relationship with God. Now, our faith, it grows when we begin to trust God with real concrete things.

When I came to faith, there's a sense in which it still is abstract. Now, still real, but abstract, meaning I had a real sense that I was a sinner and I was guilty for God and that God is real and if he really is real, he is really worth knowing.

But you do see, in a sense, those are big ideas, big concepts. Now, I was converted under those circumstances, but when did faith begin to grow and strengthen?

[16:47] It's when those big, abstract kind of feelings and ideas become very concrete things. I'm going to trust God with this relationship. I'm going to trust God with this friendship.

I'm going to submit to God with decisions about where I'm going to go to university. Those were concrete things. Those are the place where faith was strengthened and faith grew.

Now, I think wealth is one of those things for us. Perpetually, week after week, it is a way in which we use our resources in such a way that this demonstrates are we trusting God or are we not? Are we loving God and neighbor with our money? It's routine and we're conscious of the cost of it. Now, I'm happy when our EFT goes through and support the church every month and I'm happy that it pays staff salaries and it's helping to advance church planting and the growth of the gospel in South Africa.

but if I'm honest, there's a little bit of a niggle in the back of my mind every time that EFT goes through that says, James, you really don't have a plan to pay for university, right?

[17:59] James, surfing's a lot easier in a new wetsuit versus a 20-year-old one. You know, so it's like, it's still there but these are concrete ways in which we get the opportunity to grow and strengthen our faith with our wealth.

In a corresponding way, Psalm 39 addresses the anxiety of time. Now, we are finite creatures. Like I said, there's only 168 hours in a week. We need to work and sleep and spend time with family and friends.

These are all good things to be used in the right way and the right means that we might glorify God and do them the right way. But verses 4, 5, and 6 describes how we are in the world.

It describes us as fleeting. We are also described as the smallest measurement at the time which is a hand breath. And then he goes on further.

We're not just a hand breath, we're a breath. A breath. And then verse 6 actually goes on to describe us we are so inconsequential. It's as if we're not even a real thing.

[ 19 : 02 ] We are like mere phantoms. It's like a specter, something that I think it was there, I think I saw it, but it's not even really real. Now there are two ways to respond to this reality that we are but a breath but we are like phantoms.

One way is what Capetonians do in April which is if you have a really nice week in April, 30 degrees outside, there's no wind, the surf is good, you know what's coming.

June, July, and August is coming. Weeks of rain and cold and short days are coming. I don't know about you, but I go into a bit of a panic in April if the weather's nice because I have got to get it in. I've got to have fun now. I'm grasping at the last bits of summer. So one way to respond to the reality that we are but a breath is to panic.

A few years ago, it dawned on me that I was middle-aged. So I'm 43 and I was explaining to a friend describing someone else who is middle-aged and it was the first time I realized as I was describing this other person, I got off the phone and I was like, I just described myself.

[ 20 : 16 ] And likewise, when you see this, when people hit middle-aged, there can be a decade or two of this panic of I've got to grasp a thing, I've got to get the most in, I've got to do for the next two decades what I do the last week of April when the weather's nice.

I scramble. But the knowledge of our finiteness and the grace of God, it's not, God doesn't tell us this that we would panic.

I think he tells us this that we would live fully present in the moment. This is what many of us need to hear. As a younger church on a whole, this means a lot of us are single or newly married without kids and we're wanting to move on.

we're wanting to live in the next phase of life. There are days and times where we look forward to being empty nesters but I don't want that to be the cost of enjoying my children now.

We always, almost by nature, we're looking forward, we're thinking what's next is going to be better. But the reality that we are nothing more than a breath means that you uniquely have this moment right now.

[ 21 : 31 ] Theologian Ken Boas says, there's only two days that exist for you. There's today and the day. The day when Jesus comes back. Those are the only two moments in time that you're guaranteed right now.

It's today and the day that Christ comes back. The grace of God in our life, in our finiteness, also means that we would not want to go back to a previous life stage either.

The reality of the gospel is that the longer you're alive, the greater your experience of God is. the greater your experience of his grace is. The gospel has a forward lean.

In Christ, we all need to hear that our best days are in front of us and not behind us. So the gospel, God's grace, and the reality of our finiteness does these two things.

It allows us to live fully present in the moment we're in and it allows us to lean forward in hope knowing that our best days are in front of us. By all accounts, I really struggle to live fully present.

[ 22 : 28 ] I tend to live too much in the future and by consequence can create anxiety for myself. I love living in the idea and the idea of future realities and ideas.

During lockdown in 2020, I tortured myself by living in the smallest province in South Africa, Haltang, not being able to leave Haltang. And you would often find me on Google Maps exploring, digitally exploring South Africa, digitally exploring the places I wanted to go.

And I was looking forward to the lockdown being over. You can trust me, I explored the very edges of Haltang during lockdown and it's not that big. You guys were much better off here in the Western Cape than we were.

But that's just an example, I guess, kind of a silly example of I can fail to live in the present moment. My family and myself, we are in this country perpetually on a temporary status.

We have a visa that renews every three years. Thankfully, our visas were just renewed and so we're good for another three years now. But we made our applications in August and visa applications had been taking 18 months to two years to hear back.

[ 23 : 40 ] And so in the sense of just submitting our application for a visa, we knew we had at least another 18 months or two years. But then in November, I got a text message that said, your decision for your visa has been reached.

It's time to collect your decision. Now, they don't tell you in the text message if you've got your visa. They tell you a decision's been reached. So now you have to go queue with anxiety for six hours and wait.

And they pull out an envelope and they either pull out a letter that says, you've been rejected, here's the appeal process, so forth, so on, or they pull out a sticker that goes in your passport. Fortunately, I saw the sticker come out. I'm like, okay, good to go. But when the week of time, so I tend to live in the future, the week of time between receiving the SMS that says, your decision has been reached, it's time for collection, and the actual collection.

I actually had one of the best weeks I've had the entire year. I lived more free and more fully in the present moment because I knew this could be gone. You could be gone in my life.

[ 24 : 49 ] That the ministry that I've been working for could be gone. And all the things that seemed to bother me to be a burden, that I didn't enjoy doing, I suddenly enjoyed them.

The wind didn't bother me. Oh, look how beautiful the clouds are blowing over the mountain. The crazy drivers in Cape Town. Oh, Cape Town's so beautiful. It's such an eclectic city. We all get to do this together.

It's like, so you get the point. Because I lived present with the knowledge that it could be taken away in a moment, it helped me live fully present in those moments I had.

And I think that's what God wants us, the way he wants us to live. That our finiteness is not meant to bring anxiety to us. It's meant to free us to live fully present in these moments.

This quote from C.S. Lewis summarizes the nature of this well. This is from C.S. Lewis. When I have learned to love God better than my earthly dearest, I shall love my earthly dearest better than I do now.

[ 25 : 55 ] Insofar I learned to love my earthly dearest at the expense of God and instead of God, I shall be moving towards a state in which I shall not love my earthly dearest at all. When first things are put first, second things are not suppressed but increased.

I guarantee you, I enjoy the people, I enjoy my family, I enjoy the beaches and the mountain and the beauty of this place when I live in such a way knowing that it's God is ultimate and I am finite. Knowing the grace of God allows us to trust God with our wealth and with our time. Finally, let's look at verses 12 and 13 together. Verse 12, 13.

Hear my prayer, Lord, listen to my cry for help. Do not be deaf to my weeping. I dwell with you as a foreigner, a stranger as all my ancestors were. Look away from me that I may enjoy life again before I depart and am no more.

The writer acknowledges that his life lacks permanence as he is like a foreigner, a stranger and that while God, discipline is on him, he cannot enjoy his life. But the psalmist's prayer has been heard.

[ 27 : 06 ] God has looked away from the psalmist's sin and our sin while looking to Christ to receive the punishment we deserve. We are the worthy objects of the wrath of God but Christ has received our punishment in our place.

We are the ones who do not deserve to have our prayers heard and yet God has heard our prayers. While Jesus is the one who's worthy to have his prayers heard, did not have them answered for our sake.

Jesus who lived a perfect life said this just before his crucifixion he prayed, my father, if it is possible, may this cup, that's the cup of your wrath, may this cup be taken from me yet not as I will but as you will.

That Jesus' prayer wasn't answered in that moment for our sake. If Jesus was essentially saying, father, if we can save them without my death and without my suffering then let it happen.

but it wasn't possible. Jesus took that suffering for us. The only one worthy to have his prayers answered went unanswered for our sake. The only one who deserved to live forever was cut off so that we might live forever.

[ 28 : 15 ] Let's pray. God, we pray that as we look to your word we would experience the grace of God. we would have the Holy Spirit working us over with your word to bring transformation, to see the need for grace, to experience the grace of God.

And Lord, I pray that this grace would free us from being overly anxious about wealth and about time and would free us to live fully present in the moments we have.

God, would you do this in us? Would you help us to be a congregation who cherishes the moment, who gives thanks in all circumstances, and who glorifies you in all things?

We pray this in Christ's name. Amen.