

Everyone is but a Breath! - Rev. David Parker

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[0:00] If we can come then back to this psalm, Psalm 39. And just before I begin the psalm, just to say to you, share with you that when you are engaging with the book of Psalms, do remember that the Psalms are presented to us in a poetic form.

So think of poetry and the main poetic form which the Psalms are presented to us in is something called parallelism.

And you'll note when you carefully read the Psalms that the Psalmist has usually got two lines that are either saying the same thing in a different way or developing one thought even further.

And so the first thing you have to think about when you're engaging with the book of Psalms is poetry. I don't mean in priority terms, just there's four things and that's the first one.

Second is prayers. They're a book of prayers. They're an absolute treasure to read and to engage with in the prayers of God's real people in their real journey as believers.

[1:29] And thirdly, they're a book of praise. This is a wonderful manual of praise. And therefore, they have this great characteristic that they're also a book of praise.

And fourthly, and certainly not least, they are a picture, a comprehensive picture of the believer's journey and pilgrimage to glory.

Because they cover the mountaintop experiences and they cover the valleys and everything else in between. So they're a rich treasury and I don't know personally what I would do if the book of Psalms were not part of the canon.

I would almost feel there had been some lack and some loss. Anyway, let's have a look at this psalm. Do you ever feel God is treating you unfairly?

Or His dealings or discipline or chastisement with you are somewhat severe? That the afflictions He's put us through or we are currently going through seem over the top for people such as you and I are fragile, frail and fleeting.

[3:08] Well, if you do, you're not alone. We've just finished singing a psalm, Psalm 13, which begins with the words, How long, Lord, will you forget me forever?

This psalm of David explores some of those thoughts and feelings.

The psalms, you see, are never idealistic, but honest and ready to share the valleys as well as the mountaintop experience of believers.

We're going to look at three things from this psalm, although we're probably only in our journey of the psalm get to verse 7.

And we might do the other half of the psalm as one of the other nights, but we'll see. Three things we're looking at is, one, David's suffering in silence.

[4:15] And secondly, David's spiritual insights through that suffering. And thirdly, David's faith and hope.

This is in no way an essay on Christian suffering. Still less is it an essay on suffering in general. It's simply what's happening with David at this point in his walk as a believer, and as such has the same validity as his sentiments say in Psalm 23, The Lord is my shepherd, which is a psalm exuberating with his confidence at that point.

Firstly then, David's suffering in silence. We quickly realize that there is indeed some problem in verse 2.

I was mute and silent. I held my peace to no avail, and my distress grew worse.

[5:31] So we are immediately thrown into some insight that David is in a certain amount of distress at the moment, and it's serious.

But we also learn that even while David is going through this suffering and this distress, and we cannot be absolutely sure and clear what it might have been, he made a pledge.

And listen to this pledge that he made in verse 1. I said, I will guard my ways. Notice that word guard. That I may not sin with my tongue. You might say, You might say, You could look at it this way, The ways that he's wanting to guard are the ways that the tongue can go, because it's a pretty, a loose cannon member of our make-up. So David has made this pledge. And we also learn that he will guard his mouth with a muzzle. [7:04] Now, that shows you, does it not, the strength of his determination to guard his tongue. Of course he's not putting on a physical muzzle.

It's poetry I've just said to you. But he's showing that the determination of his will and of his heart for God, that it's like putting a muzzle over his mouth so that it cannot sin. But what else does he mean? He says, So long as the wicked are in my presence. What is his concern? His concern is for God's honor. His concern is because of his reverence for God. Because of his respect for God. Because of the view that he has of God's godness, if you like. His majesty. His holiness. And as I say, as he makes this pledge, there he's saying it himself, I said, I will guard my ways, that I may not sin with my tongue. [8:38] I will guard my mouth with a muzzle, so long as the wicked are in my presence. Because, you see, he was concerned that he, in the waves, and in the torrent, and in the sea of things that were going on inside him, his thoughts and feelings, he was concerned that if he allowed his tongue free reign, he might dishonor God by saying things that are inappropriate, if you like.

And that would attack the honor of God, and the goodness of God. And he tells you, I was mute and silent. But then, he goes on to tell us, but my distress grew worse. I held my peace to no avail, he says. He says, my heart became hot within me. I think he means that whatever was there, as it were, banging at the door to try and articulate what was going on within him, in his suffering, and in his distress. Whatever it was, it was becoming worse. as I mused, the fire burned. And you know, it's quite, there's a kind of irony here, as well, because he's made so much of his pledge to keep silent before unbelievers, lest he dishonors God.

And then, at the end of verse 3, then I spoke with my tongue. But, here's the thing. [10:36] he's about to speak to God. Now, in general, it isn't a good thing for any of us if we're going through some serious suffering, and we are full of a whole sea of emotions, perhaps such as fear, anger, anger, loneliness, a sense that no one really can help us.

and I don't think that this teaching is saying that we shouldn't speak to anybody, but it's basically David being concerned that he speaks out of hand in the presence of unbelievers. others, but of course it's good. A sorrow shared can be helpful. And so, I'm not suggesting that we pretend or act in a pseudo-spiritual manner, but that we're careful like David not to be dishonoring or irreverent in our speech about God. but we certainly should not be silent before God. God indeed is the only being that we can truly be ourselves with.

Do you believe that? I believe that with all my heart. God is the one who knows us. He knows our down sitting. He knows our uprising. [12:24] But more than that, he knows our frame. This is a wonderful text. I've loved it for years. He knoweth our frame and remembers we are dust.

And then that wonderful New Testament phrase that Jesus was tested and touched and touched with the feeling of our infirmities. God knows how frail we are. God knows how fragile we are. God knows how fleeting our existences, but he cares for us with an infinite heart of love. Oh, we should not be silent before God. He bids us come as we heard this morning of Jesus saying, come unto me. All you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take your burdens to God. Take those secrets, take those sea and waves of different feelings and emotions that are troubling you, whether it's to do with relationships, whether it's to do with your future, whether it's to do with whatever it might be, love. [13:46] Because that's what the psalmists did in the book of Psalms. They poured out their soul before God.

I hope that you will feel that you are able to do that.

This is exactly what David did, and it takes me to my second point. David's suffering and spiritual insights, and they're articulated in the psalm in verses 4 to 6.

But before we go to them, notice how David begins his speech. He begins it with, O Lord.

Now, I think, O Lord, is seen in three times in this psalm. It's seen in verse 4, it's seen in verse 7, and I think it's seen further down in verse 13, O Lord.

[15 : 06] And the reason I'm mentioning that is the original language that's behind this is trying to communicate there is great feeling, there is great intensity of emotion in these words of the psalmist to God.

O Lord, make me know my end, and what is the measure of my days? Let me know how fleeting I am.

Behold, you have made my days a few handbreads, and my lifetime time is as nothing before you. The two truths, there's two truths that we're going to look at here that David has gained more insight into.

They are indeed how fragile and fleeting our lives are as human beings, but also how absurd a life is apart from God.

Look at what he says about how fragile his life is. O Lord, make me know my end, and what is the measure of my days, and let me know how fleeting I am.

[16 : 51] I want you to note those words, know. All of us know in theory that our lives are 70, 80, 90, 100 years or whatever it might be.

All of us know that. But perhaps the younger we are, we feel that that is an eternity away. But what David is doing, I think, is because of his suffering, because of his distress, and it is really serious, as we'll see as we go through this psalm, and he feels as if he probably hasn't got much time left, that this has brought out powerfully to him his mortality.

The fact that we don't know what a day might bring forth, the fact that in a moment he could be gone, let me know how fleeting, let me really know this, let me know it in a way that will impact how I live for you, God.

Let me know it in a way that will impact whether I follow Jesus in every area of my life. Let me know it in a way that I will be a better disciple.

Let me know it in a way that I will not be living a life building for things here. Behold, you have made my days a few hand breaths.

[18 : 42] That was one of the shortest measuring tools, if you like, back then. let me know how fleeting I am.

Behold, you have made my hands a few hand breaths, and my lifetime is as nothing before you. Surely all mankind stands. You can tell that David here is becoming so acutely aware of the uncertainty of life, of its brevity, of what the writer to the Hebrews could say here, have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come.

do we really know, in the way that I'm suggesting David knew, in an experiential way, how fragile and fleeting our lives are.

The New Testament tells us to redeem the time because the days are evil. We might always be saying, tomorrow I'll be a better Christian. next year I'll try and get my spiritual life sorted out.

In the meantime, the clock is not only ticking, it's accelerating and racing. But there's something else here that David has learned.

[20 : 21] Not just how fleeting and fragile his life is, but he's learned this as well. Surely for nothing, verse 6, human beings are in turmoil.

Human beings heap up wealth and don't know who will gather. In other words, David is seeing something that we might call the absurdity of our existence as human beings.

that all our sweat, all our blood, sweat, and tears, all our desires, all our craving and running after this, that, and the next thing, hoping that somehow or other that will make us feel better or feel happier.

surely for nothing, says this writer, says this psalmist, they are in turmoil. The absurdity of all our striving after the next consumer, consumer fix, whether a bigger car, whether a bigger house, whether a more prestigious career, whether greater holidays, being sucked into this materialism and hedonism of what somebody calls our consumer world, who dish out lies after lies, trying to pretend to us that if only we had such and such, we would be happy and whole.

Jesus gives the lie, does he not, to that nonsense, when Jesus said this, a person's life consists not in the abundance of things that they possess.

[22 : 30] It's not bigger houses that are going to reach into the deep regions of our being because we're made in the image of God and for God.

we are spiritual beings, we are beings that are relational, we are beings that are made for an exquisite relationship with God and we will always feel empty until we get that relationship with God. As the great ancient Christian Augustine used to say, our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you. There was a playwright, an Irish playwright, called Samuel Beckett, and he was an exponent or a proponent of something called the theatre of the absurd.

God. And this was a group of people, of which Beckett was one, who also saw the absurdity of modern life.

And they had a famous play called Waiting for Godel, and the way that he spelt that last word of sound, did his G-O-D-O-T.

[24 : 02] And if you were in the theatre looking at this play, you would see the stage was utterly empty and bare. It had no choreography or no stage apparatus or anything like that.

And there was two individuals speaking to each other. But guess what? They were speaking gobbledygook. It was going nowhere.

It had no design. It had no purpose. It had no point. It had no omega point. So, David not only sees the fleetingness of existence apart from God, but he sees its absurdity.

He knows that nothing that we amass in this life will ever reach our deepest needs as human being for love, for acceptance, to be valued.

what a value you get when you become a Christian. That Jesus calls us his brothers.

[25 : 24] That Jesus calls us his body. That God calls us his children. That God says we're going to be ultimately made in the image of Christ.

When we see him, we shall know him because we shall be like him. And here is the omega point for all Christians to be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ.

I hope that you can see the absurdity of life without God. This brings me to my final point, David's faith and hope.

David's faith, of course, is evident throughout the psalm. I'll not even give you verses to illustrate that. You read through it carefully and you'll see it yourself.

But what's interesting is the psalm has got 13 verses in it. And right in the center, there's six verses before verse 7 and there's six verses after verse 7.

[26 : 36] So, right at the centerpiece of this psalm, of this sufferer, of this person in distress, of this person who could not keep his tongue silent, but sensibly used it to speak to God.

Look what he says in verse 7. And now, O Lord, after I've spoken of how fragile and fleeting life can be, of how absurd it can be, of how people are in turmoil over trying to get this, that, and the next thing, and now, O Lord, for what do I wait?

my hope is in you. There is nothing, says David, or no one, and no number of people anywhere in this world that is worthy of my hope but one, God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

My hope is in you. This hope is critical for David, and of course it's critical for all those who are experiencing suffering.

I like an Australian singer called Nick Cave. I particularly like his ballad songs, and he has a phrase in one of those songs, suffering has its natural end.

[28 : 53] and it will have its supernatural end. There will be no more sighing, there will be no more tears.

Though this body of mine outwardly is perishing, there is a glorious body awaiting every single Christian.

and it's not that it would be, I think, not the best way of thinking of eternal life as an unending duration.

I do not think that that's the emphasis on eternal life. The emphasis on eternal life is it's the life, it's God's life, it's Zoe, it is the Jesus Christ who is that life and who is that eternal life.

And it's moving towards that eternal life and towards that omega point of, because salvation is past, salvation has present, and salvation has future.

[30 : 13] we await, says Paul, to wit, the redemption of our bodies. And so, this sufferer, against his existential crisis, having stared into the darkness of his mortality, and have looked away from

the absurdity that he can see all around him, and now looks to God.

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

Why is that so wonderful? Because it's a certain hope. hope, because we have been given the first fruit of that hope in having been given the Holy Spirit, whereby we cry, Abba, Father.

Hope is a necessary ingredient of true faith, and hope, one might say, perhaps particularly, I say perhaps, is oriented towards the future dimension of salvation, the future of the God's answers to our longings and prayers.

That's Psalm 13. How long, Lord? How long, So much of our Christianity is future.

[32:01] Let me ask you this question as we close. is verse 7 of this psalm your confession? Can you say, O Lord, my hope is in you?

Especially, and this is hard, and I have never been called thus far into anything like this, but what I might call the terrifying sovereignty of God.

I was sharing with someone today, I worked in a children's hospice for five years, and those young mums and dads were going through the worst nightmare that any parent can go through, having received a diagnosis that their child would not live into adulthood, and they were on a long journey of grief and loss.

There were a couple who were both detectives who experienced that loss. That's why I call it the terrifying sovereignty of God.

here is David going through whatever this distress is, and yet, and now, O Lord, for what do I wait?

[33:59] My hope is in you. May God and may Jesus Christ be all our hope. Amen.

We're going to conclude our service then by singing in Psalm 93, and that's on page 123, and we'll be singing the whole Psalm, the Lord is King, his throne endures majestic in his height.

The Lord is robed in majesty and armed with strength and might. Let's be upstanding for this final praise. The Lord is King, his throne endures, majestic in his height.

may Your throne is strong, and you are gone from all eternity.

The seats of Lord have lifted up, they lifted up their voice.

[36:09] The seats of Lord have lifted up their voice, and made up high device.

The Lord have thrown on highest throne, more powerful is He.

Land, lander of the ocean's wings, our breakers of the sea.

Your glorious steps, your torch and earth, unchanging is your word.

And holiness, our Lord, your heart, are endless days, O Lord.

[37:25] May the love of God our Father, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the fellowship and communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all now and forevermore. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.