

Psalm 39 - Complaining

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[0 : 0 0] Well, today I'd like us to turn back to Psalm 39, that passage that we read, and we're going to in many ways look at the Psalm as a whole, but we can read again at verse 7. Verse 7 is the middle verse of the Psalm. Very often in the Psalms, one of the key points being emphasised will be found in the very middle. Psalm 39 verse 7, and now, O Lord, for what do I wait? My hope is in You. As I said when we were reading, there are many other Psalms that are very, very familiar to us. We sing them every week, and there are some that I'm sure that you will know off by heart or certainly close to it. But there are many others that are not so well known, and one of these lesser well known Psalms is Psalm 39. But despite the fact that it's not maybe so well known, and I suppose in many ways I'm speaking for myself more than anybody else, as I said I was not very familiar with Psalm 39, and maybe I'm making a hasty assumption that you're the same. But I hope that we aren't too far from each other in this situation. Certainly from my perspective, Psalm 39 is fairly unknown, but it is nevertheless a very important Psalm, and it's a very helpful Psalm. And one of the reasons for that is because Psalm 39 is dealing with something that you and I experience virtually every day of our lives. It's dealing with an issue that constantly affects our homes, our workplaces, and even our churches. And it's an issue that can be hugely damaging both to ourselves and to others. When we were reading it, I asked you to bear in mind the question, what is Psalm 39 about in one word? And I don't know what word maybe you came up with, but as you can probably guess from the sermon title on the bulletin, I think that the one word that sums up Psalm 39 is that this is a Psalm about complaining. It's a Psalm about complaining. And I want us just to spend a wee while this morning going through the Psalm and seeing what it has to teach us. Psalm 39 divides quite neatly into two halves.

The first half is from verses one to six, second half is from verses seven to thirteen. And as I hope you'll see, verse seven is in many ways a turning point in this Psalm, and it is the central part and key to the understanding of what is being said here.

So I just want us to look at these two halves together. So first of all, we can look at verses one to six. It's clear from these verses that this Psalm is arising from a period of distress in David's life. Now, we don't know what that is. And very often with the Psalms, we don't know what the specific context is, but there's something wrong. It may be illness, it could be the threat of an enemy, and it could simply be a time of darkness and of depression in his life. Whatever it is, something's wrong. And in verse one, we see that his initial course of action is to try to deal with this situation by keeping silent. He says in verse one, 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. And so it's clear that David is beginning with a consciousness of the importance of keeping silent and of the dangers of speaking inappropriately. He's aware that there's a risk of sin when you speak. And it also appears that he's a bit concerned about the company that he's keeping.

And so I'm not entirely sure who the wicked are in this verse, but it's clear that David is worried about those who are going to hear what he says. And maybe it's the case that he doesn't want to come across that he is criticising God in front of people who are opponents of God and whoever the wicked are, that's clearly what lies behind that word, the fact that they are hostile to God and oppose him. So in many ways, so far so good.

[4 : 32] David seems to start off with good intentions, but verses two and three reveal a growing sense of frustration in David. Look at what it says. 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. So although outwardly David is silent inwardly, he is getting more and more distressed. And that distress is boiling up inside him into an immense sense of frustration. And the poetry here is very, very vivid. David's distress is kindling in his heart, says there that he's, he's musing over it. And you can almost feel your own heart heating up as you read it. He's musing over it. We would probably say he is stewing over it, stewing over whatever the circumstance and situation is. And the more time goes on, the more the fire burns within him. And eventually it reaches the point where he cannot keep silent anymore. And in his frustration, he complains in verses four to six, Oh Lord, make me know my end and what is the measure of my days. Let me know how fleeting I am. Behold, you've made my days a few hundredths and my lifetime is as nothing before you. Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath. Surely a man goes about as a shadow. Surely for nothing they are in turmoil. Man heaps up wealth and does not know who will gather. Now as you read those verses, what do you think? Is David right or wrong to speak like that? What do you think? It's an intriguing sound because it's quite hard to interpret. You could say, well, he's emphasizing a lot of truth. Man's days are fleeting and in comparison to God, we are nothing. And in many ways people go through life in a way that seems sort of pointless. So there's truth in what he's saying. So is he expressing basic truths of existence in a clear way? Or is he expressing frustration?

Is he almost just blurting things out to God? I think you could take it in either way, but I lean towards the idea that this is more an outburst. And I think the reason I come to that conclusion is because in the previous version said that he's been boiling up inside him in frustration. So it would imply that that frustration is building up to this outburst.

And if you look at that, the main theme of these verses seems to be a sense of disillusion. In other words, David is saying, what is the point? What is the point of life? It's so short. And what am I? I am nothing. I'm a waste of space. And the turmoil that people endure, the work that they do, all the things that happen in life, everything they achieve, it's pointless. And so David seems to be complaining. And this reminds us of one of the many remarkable features of the Psalms, and they are so, so true to real life. Because if you ask yourself the question, what challenges are you going to face this week as a Christian? So you go through life and Christian, what challenges are you going to face? Well, it is unlikely that you are going to face a challenge to key theological doctrines. So doctrines like the doctrine of the Trinity, or the nature of justification or the extent of the atonement, you probably won't face that kind of situation this week. Of course, you might. You might face that kind of questions, but most weeks we don't. And most people don't really want to discuss these things nowadays, which is a sad, a sad thing. So you probably won't face questions like that. However, I think it's virtually guaranteed, virtually guaranteed that this week, you will either encounter someone else who is complaining, or we ourselves will battle with the temptation to complain. Because complaining is a huge part of life, isn't it? Virtually every day we hear complaints. And so when this Sam describes David trying to keep quiet, but gradually stewing over things and then ultimately complaining about how unfair and pointless and frustrating life is, he is being incredibly true to life. And

I think every one of us can probably say, I've been there myself. We are prone to complain. We're prone to complain about serious things, maybe our government or the way society is, or the way things are portrayed in the media. These are very serious things. We're also prone to complain about trivial things. Maybe if the newspapers are late or the ferry is broken down, or if there's a queue at Manor Roundabout that takes more than 30 seconds to clear, we can always complain. Sometimes there are big things, some things about little things. Now, as we look at this topic, I'm not saying that all complaining is wrong, because it isn't. Complaining is a bit like anger. It can be appropriate, it can be righteous.

But as with anger, I think it's safe to say that only rarely is that actually true. And the first half of this Sam is revealing to us two pitfalls that we can easily fall into.

[10 : 40] And it's important that we think about both of these. The two pitfalls are unhealthy silence and unhealthy speech. In the first three versions of this Sam, we saw that David's silence was unhealthy. He's frustrated. And although he's trying to keep quiet, he is allowing that frustration to boil up inside him. And he's almost feeding it himself. As verse three said, he mused over it. And that word basically means to murmur or whisper, conveys the idea of saying something over and over and over again. And isn't that what we do? When we've got something to complain about, we go over it and over it and over it and over it. And here we have David silently stewing over whatever it is that's frustrating him. And that silence is a breeding ground for bitterness. And we have to acknowledge that that's a trap that we can fall into that I fall into. That we can all fall into. When something is wrong, we can bottle it up. We can stew over it. And we can allow frustration and bitterness to take root in our hearts. And Sam 39 is warning us. God is warning us through this

Sam about the dangers of such unhealthy silence. And the Bible gives us two solutions when we face this temptation to complain silently. The first solution is that we should talk to God. And one of the key aspects of prayer is that it is the act of pouring our hearts out to God. Sometimes we think that prayer is only when we talk about the best of things in the best of ways to God. But the model of prayer that the Bible gives us is in many ways much messier than that because in the Bible prayer is someone pouring their heart out before God. And the amazing thing is that God wants us to do that. God wants you to pour your heart out to him. I would remind you of that in various places in the Bible.

We can see Sam 62 on God rests my salvation and my glory, my mighty rock, my refuge is God. Trust him at all times, O people, pour out your heart before him. God is a refuge for us. Same as in Peter. Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him because he cares for you. And so when circumstances arise in our lives that cause us frustration and give us that strong temptation to complain, God says, talk to me about it. Talk to me about it. And that should always be our first step. So if somebody annoys you at work, which they sometimes do, pour out your heart before God, pray for the individual, pray for the situation, talk to God about it. If somebody frustrates you at home, which sometimes they do, pour out your heart to God about it. Pray for the situation, pray for the individuals, talk to God. And even if something happens at church that you find difficult, whatever that may be, step one is to talk to God about it. Pour out your heart before him. And always, remember that God wants you to talk to him. And that is one of the most simple biblical truths and yet sometimes it's the simplest of truths that are the easiest to forget.

And often we feel like God would not want us to talk to him and God would certainly not want to listen to us. But the Bible makes it so beautifully clear that God always wants to hear your voice, even when things are frustrating, and even when everything inside you makes you want to complain and moan, God says, just talk to me about it. It's a remarkable thing that we are told in Matthew 9 about Jesus. It says, when Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

So that's telling us what is God's reaction to someone who's harassed. He has compassion. So we can talk to God. That's the first solution. The second solution, as I'm sure you can guess, is that we should talk to each other. Indeed, the Bible is full of commandments that can only be kept if we talk to each other. I've put some examples in the screen here.

[16 : 13] Galatians 6-2, bear one another's burdens. 1 Thessalonians 5-11, encourage one another and build one another up. James 5-16, confess your sins to one another. Mark 12, love your neighbour as yourself. Now, these are all biblical imperatives. They are commandments.

They are things that you have to do. These are not options for the Christian. They are not optional extras. These are biblical, biblical commands from God himself. They are imperatives.

But none of these imperatives, none of these commandments can be kept in silence. None of them. And it's reminding us that it's vital that as Christians we talk to each other, we share our concerns, we acknowledge our struggles and we help each other. It is so easy to go to God alone as a Christian. So easy, but it's very unhealthy. And of course, it's untheological because theologically we are a family. And so it should never be the case that in practice we keep each other at arms length. We have been reminded of the vital point that if your circumstances leave you feeling the way David felt in Psalm 39, if you are left feeling like that, talk to your brother or a sister in Christ about how you feel. Talk to someone and share with them. No matter what our circumstances are, as Christians we should be talking more. It's what God instructs us to do because it's what God wants us to do. And yet we can always be very scared of that, can't we? Sometimes we're very, very scared to talk to each other. And I'm the same. I'm exactly the same. But again, we have to remind the fact that the Bible has given us a long list of commandments that make it safe to talk to each other as Christians. The Bible has said to us, do not gossip, do not mock, do not slander, do not laugh at somebody, do not treat somebody with contempt or anything like that because all of these things are worldliness. The Bible is reminding us that as Christians we are to be gentle, patient, compassionate, encouraging. And these are the commandments that frame the fact that we can talk to one another. And so if we pour our hearts out to somebody, even if we are confessing sin, the outcome of that, if we are being obedient to scripture, the outcome of that will never be that what we've told will become the talk of the village. Rather, the outcome of that is that we will mutually encourage one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. The Bible tells us that when we face struggles, talk to God, talk to each other. Psalm 39 reminds us that at times silence can be very unhealthy. But Psalm 39 is also teaching us that unhealthy silence will all too often lead on to unhealthy speech. And by the time David does speak in verses four to six, it appears that he is disillusioned and frustrated. And it's reminding us of the great principle that Jesus told, out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. And so if we allow complaint and bitterness to build up within us, then it's inevitable that it's going to manifest itself in unhelpful speech. Now all of this is reminding us of a bigger point and a vital point that we must, must write in our hearts, the fact that sin does not justify sin. Often somebody may do something that will cause us frustration.

Maybe they'll let us down, maybe they'll treat us badly, maybe they'll do something that we disagree with, maybe they'll do something that we know is actually wrong and against God's law. But none of these things are an excuse to respond with sin. And we have to be on guard against this because the devil loves to make us respond to sin with more sin. So for example, we hear about a moral failing in somebody's life. And we talk about it to other people, which is basically what it means to gossip. We hear about a moral failing, we gossip. If we do that, we are responding to sin with even more sin. If somebody has done something wrong and we refuse to forgive them and we draw a line and we hold a grudge that we will never, ever, ever cross and never, ever, ever take away, then if we do that, we are responding to sin with even more sin. And if we are bitter towards somebody who has made a mistake, then we are responding to sin with more sin. And I speak to myself before anybody else in this area, as Christians, we must guard ourselves against this. Repay no one evil for evil. Paul writes in Romans 12, 17, Repay no one evil for evil.

Don't respond to sin with more sin. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to what is honourable in the sight of all. We must guard ourselves not just against unhealthy silence, but also against unhealthy speech. So that's the first half of the Psalm, verses 1 to 6. But the Psalm, as you can see, does not stop there. And as I said, verse 7 is in many ways a turning point. And the second half of the Psalm, I do think, provides us with a better example of how to cope when we are tempted to complain. In verse 7, David pauses and he reflects on how he should respond as we have there in verse 7. And now, O Lord, for what do I wait? My hope is in you. This is by far the most positive statement that we have in the Psalm so far. Basically, David is saying, what should I do? Where do I go at a time like this? And he gives the beautifully clear answer. He says to God, my hope is in you. So verse 7 is the turning point. And from here, we would naturally expect the Psalm to become much more positive. And you can almost expect a great description of how God delivered David from these difficult circumstances and how God removed all his reasons for complaining.

[23 : 06] But that's not what happens. It's not what we see in the Psalm. And verses 8 to 13 are again quite hard to gauge. We ask ourselves the same question we keep asking, is David right or wrong in what he says in the second half of the Psalm? Well, let's read it and see.

Deliver me from all my transgressions. Do not make me the scorn of the fool. I am mute. I do not open my mouth. For it is you who have done it. Remove your stroke from me. I am spent by the hostility of your hand. When you discipline a man with rebukes for sin, you consume like a moth what is dear to him. Surely all mankind is a mere breath.

Hear my prayer, O Lord, and give ear to my cry. Hold not your peace at my tears. For I am a sojourner with you, a guest like all my fathers. Look away from me that I may smile again before I depart and am no more.

Now, at one level, it seems like David is still complaining because the tone is still fairly negative. He talks about the heaviness of God's discipline and he's wanting his circumstances to change. However, despite the fact that it's still fairly negative in tone, I do think that this part of the Psalm is giving us a better example about how to respond when we are tempted to complain. And I very briefly want to highlight three key things. The first of these is that in these verses we see self-examination. That's one of the notable features of the second half of the Psalm. Instead of David simply complaining about his circumstances and the general pointlessness of life, David's focus turns towards examining himself. And in doing so, he gets a better perspective and he acknowledges his own sinfulness. In verse eight, he recognizes all his transgression. In verse 11, he acknowledges that God's discipline is a result of sin, arises from our sinfulness. And this is reminding us that one of the most important defenses against complaining is to examine ourselves.

All too often complaint can arise from a sense of self-righteousness and from the fact that we are very often inclined to judge others. And I am guilty of that myself. But we must never forget that the only lives that should really fall under our scrutiny are our own.

[25 : 39] It's easy to complain about other people, but the minute we are tempted to do so we should ask ourselves, am I like that? We might complain about people who are rude or lazy or selfish or arrogant, but really we should be asking ourselves, am I like that? And all of this is reminding us of the importance of our own example. We must examine our own personal holiness and strive to follow the instruction and the principles that God has set before us in his word. Jesus gives a beautifully clear illustration of this whole principle from Matthew chapter seven verse one. Judge not that you be not judged, for with the judgment you pronounce, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? But how can you say to your brother, let me take the speck out of your eye when there is a log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye. Of course what Jesus says makes such perfect sense, doesn't it? And yet the principles he sets before us here are ignored by our society at so many different levels. We must begin with self-examination and David does that in the second half of Psalm 39. The second thing that we see is petition and again that's a helpful example to us. David asks God to help him and the second half of the Psalm is full of requests. He says, deliver me, remove your stroke from me, hear my prayer and then in verse 13 he says, look away from me. Now that last one is really interesting. Is it right for David to ask God to look away from him that I may smile again? It's a fascinating statement. I think if we go back a slide we can bring it up just to look it again. Those last two lines, we go forward to here, there we are. Look away from me that I may smile again. Is it right to say that to God?

Is David right to say that? It's really interesting. I'm not sure if he's right to ask that. I think that in the context what he's saying is that it appears that he is under some kind of discipline from God and so in the first half of the Psalm he's really complaining about everything else but in the second half of the Psalm he's realizing that his own sinfulness has contributed to this situation and so his request is that this chastisement, that this discipline would come to an end. Again, I don't know if he's right or wrong to ask that question and you can reflect on that yourselves but at least he is talking to God and the key point is that when we face circumstances that make us want to complain, the correct response is to petition God but petitioning God requires humility. It's interesting what Peter says if we put forward a couple of slides now. Peter, when he talks about casting our anxieties on the Lord, his first point is humble yourselves and then cast your care on the Lord and God knew what he was talking about when he inspired Peter to say this because when you think about it often the thing that makes us want to complain more than anything else is pride, isn't it?

And our own pride makes us look down on others, makes us complain about them, makes us want to moan about them and makes us think that we have a right to judge them. Peter is saying well the first thing that we have to do to stop that is humble ourselves and so when temptation to complain arises we must humble ourselves and go straight to God for help and how I long myself to live by the mindset that says I'm not going to complain, I'm going to ask God for help instead. That's what Peter is telling us to do. So we see self-examination a vital part of Christian life. We see petition again a vital part of Christian life and at the third point and we close with this we see perseverance. Because as we said when we come to verse 7 you kind of expect the rest of the Psalm to become very good and very positive, don't you? We are expecting a resolution but it doesn't really come and Psalms don't always have a perfect happy ending and that's one of the wonderful aspects of the honesty of the Psalms and this is because Psalms are often capturing a moment in life. David is writing about a circumstance that he faced at a particular period of his life and very often moments in life are not always great and by the end of this Psalm it looks as though the reason for David's complaint is still there and he still seems fairly low in his spirits but it is this very fact that his circumstances are still difficult which is emphasising the whole point as to why he is putting his hope in the Lord. Because hope does not mean that everything is perfect now. Hope is that sense of expectation, that sense of forward looking which involves trusting God to help bring us through and whatever the circumstances of Psalm 39 were we are being reminded that

God's plans for David were far bigger and even though in David's life this seemed so hard and it caused so much frustration within his heart and in his outbursts God's plans and purposes for David were far bigger than whatever this circumstance was and just imagine that you could talk to David right now. Imagine that you could talk to David right now, David in glory and imagine that you could ask him this question, is the issue of Psalm 39 still bothering you? What do you think he would say? And what I want us to remember is that what is true of David is true for you as a Christian. We will often face circumstances that frustrate us, that disappoint us and that really do fool us with that urge to complain but we must always remember that God's goal for you is far bigger than simply resolving the complaints or frustrations of today. God's goal for you is eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ and that's why when things are hard, when things are tempting us to complain it is far better to fix our eyes on Jesus and that is really where we see the answer to this whole issue of complaining. We must look to Jesus because if we look to

Jesus we will see an example of one who had every reason and every right to complain but he never did and in Jesus we see one who is able to sympathise with their own weaknesses because he knows what it's like to be pushed and provoked and frustrated and mocked. If he's able to sympathise with you, he's able to carry your burdens, you can pour your heart out to him and in Jesus we see a saviour whose purposes for us are far bigger, he's come to give eternal life to all who trust in him and that's where our hope ultimately has to lie. Our hope is in the Lord, in the Lord Jesus Christ and if we keep our eyes on him, if we keep our thoughts on him, if we dwell on who he is and all that he has done and if we think about the blessedness of our new life in him and if we think of the glory and wonder of all the promises that are found in Jesus Christ, if we do that then all our reasons to complain will fade away. God's plans are far bigger and it will do us so much good if we keep that at the forefront of our minds and in the end this Psalm is bringing us to the point where David's question in verse 7 becomes our question. David said what am I waiting for and that becomes the question that we have to ask ourselves, what are we waiting for? What are we hoping for? What are we looking for? The only answer is that we put our hope in the Lord and that we keep our eyes firmly fixed on him. Amen.

[35 : 36] Let's pray. God our Father, we thank you that your word speaks so powerfully into our circumstances and we are so aware of the issue of complaining in our lives. We do it ourselves and we see others do it and it's something we encounter all the time. We thank you that your word addresses these issues and that it teaches us a better way and we pray, oh God, that we would always keep our hope firmly on you and that the challenges and difficulties of life would never cause us to take our eyes off you. Help us to examine ourselves, help us to always petition you with our concerns and our needs and help us to persevere with our eyes fixed on Jesus. Help us, Lord, never to be unhealthily silent. Help us to never be unhealthily speaking but help us rather, Lord, to be shaped by your word and to live the way that you want us to live. We are so aware of our feelings in this area but we thank you, oh God, that you are working in us and we thank you, oh God, that the one who began a good work in us, you, oh God, will bring that work to completion in the day of

Jesus Christ. We pray that each one of us would have our faith and our trust and our hope set on you. Amen.