

The sequence of psalms from Psalm 34 to Psalm 41 may be called *The Good Friday Psalms* because they shape the meaning of Jesus' death on the cross. These David psalms portray the faithful worshiper's struggle against evil even as they foreshadow Jesus' climactic struggle with evil in its most extreme and ultimate form. He faced crucifixion for the sake of our salvation to deliver us from the domain of sin and darkness. The original voice of the psalm, represented by David, prefigures the depths of suffering and the enduring hope of the Son of David.

The Lord's deliverance is assured in Psalm 34: "he protects all his bones, not one of them will be broken" (Ps 34:20; John 19:36). In the hours leading up to Gethsemane, Jesus quoted from Psalm 35. He described his enemies as gloating and hating him without reason (Ps 35:19; John 15:25). In Psalm 36, David laments the evil of nice people who "flatter themselves too much to detect or hate their sin" (Ps 36:2), but he revels in the pricelessness of God's unfailing love (Ps 36:7). The apostle Paul echoes the psalmist's words when he reminds believers, "you were bought at a price" (1 Cor 6:20, 7:23).

The strategy of the cross is embedded in Psalm 37's promise that "the meek will inherit the land and enjoy peace and prosperity" (Ps 37:11). Only the meek find in the message of the cross the power and wisdom of God and join the apostle in saying, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Rom 1:16). We saw earlier how the descriptive language of Psalm 38 corresponds to Isaiah 53: "Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed" (Isa 53:4-5). Augustine saw in David's lament over the abandonment of his friends and the irrational hatred of his enemies a prefiguration of Jesus' Good Friday experience.

In Psalm 39, David desperately wants to do the right thing, but it is impossible. He strives to keep his tongue from sin and he seeks to come to grips with the brevity of this transitory life. His only hope in a world of uncertainty is the Lord: "My hope is in you" (Ps 39:7). But keeping silent and holding his lament inside led to anguish and despair. He tried to wrap his mind around the emptiness and futility of life. He struggled with "all his transgressions" and the scourge of the heavy hand of God upon him. His weakness, despair, and sinfulness made it impossible for him to be his own messiah. No matter how earnest and well-intentioned, he knows he cannot save himself.

But where David is weak the Lord's Anointed One, the true and final Son of David, is strong. His silence is perfect: "He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth" (Isa 53:7). His response to the transitoriness of life certain: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am" (John

14:1-3). His grip on his emotions confident: “Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. ‘Father, glorify your name!’” (John 12:27-28). His righteousness perfect: “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21). The Son of David was able to stand in our place. “When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; ‘by his wounds you have been healed.’ For ‘you were like sheep going astray,’ but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls” (1 Peter 2:23-25).

The parallels between Psalm 38 and 39 suggest that the psalms form a continuous narrative. The repentant believer who cries out for forgiveness and protection from his enemies and prays for the Lord to come quickly *continues to struggle*. The worshiper, who feels like an alien, yet longs to be faithful in spite of the presence of the wicked (Ps 39:1) and his own transgressions (Ps 39:8). He wrestles with the futility and emptiness of life, even as he declares to the Lord, “My hope is in you” (Ps 39:7).

Painful Restraint

*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:*

Psalm 39:1-3

At the end of Psalm 39, David describes himself as a foreigner. Like his nomadic and enslaved ancestors he is a stranger. This sense of alienation impacts the meaning of the psalm from the beginning. The author of Hebrews echoes the conclusion of Psalm 39: “All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. People who say such things show how they are looking for a country of their own” (Heb 11:13-14).

The psalmist doesn’t feel like he belongs. He is no longer free to speak his mind, because it might give the wicked the wrong idea about his faith and trust in God. He is not at home in this world and the more he thinks about it, the more agitated and anguished he becomes. Believers today face this same quiet alienation and can identify with the psalmist. Those who worship God in spirit and in truth no longer feel at home in the world. Naturally, they ask, “What’s the point?”

In Psalm 38, the psalmist refused to fight back against his enemies. His non-defensive strategy meant pretending to be oblivious to their efforts to ruin him. It was as if he was deaf and mute. Instead of lashing out and retaliating in speech, the psalmist remained silent. But in Psalm 39, his intentional silence has more to do with putting a check on his growing resentment and despair. He fears that his words will be twisted by the wicked and used against the Lord. But like the prophet Jeremiah he was weary with holding it in (Jer 6:11). He agreed with Job. His one consolation was that he “had not denied the words of the Holy One” (Job 6:10). His pent-up feelings recall the Teacher in Ecclesiastes who blurted out, “Meaningless! Meaningless! Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless!” The psalmist’s suffering and the weight of his own sins were getting to him. He desperately needed the Lord’s perspective.

Our Savior weathered these same struggles and struck the right balance between silence and speech. This was especially evident on Good Friday when he defended his speech before his accusers. “I said nothing in secret,” Jesus said to the high priest. Under the most acute and hostile interrogation he reacted without hostility or defensiveness. He declared his speech open and transparent for all to hear and verify. “If I said something wrong, testify as to what is wrong,” he said. His speech reflected the veracity of his life and ministry (John 18:20-23). He clarified his non-threatening stance before Pilate: “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place” (John 18:36). He used silence to provoke and draw out the true nature of his authority, followed by decisive speech, “You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above” (John 19:11). We can easily identify with the psalmist’s feelings and pressures. His struggle is our struggle and his weakness is our weakness. This is why we can identify with our need for the Savior who was strong where we are weak and wise where we are dumb.

Brevity and Futility

*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 handbreadth;
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 wealth
without knowing whose it will finally be.*

Psalm 39:4-6

Samuel Beckett’s twenty-five second play entitled *Breath* opens with a momentary birth cry, followed by the sound of a person slowly inhaling and exhaling accompanied by an increase and decrease in the intensity of lighting faintly illuminating a stage littered with an odd assortment of items. Then, a second recorded cry, identical to the first, a death cry, ends the play. No person is seen, only two brief cries and the sound of breathing. The psalmist may have empathized with the

play write's existential despair but the purpose of his lament is radically different. Given the fleeting nature of life: "Everyone is but a breath, even those who seem secure" (Ps 39:5), the psalmist wants to order his days accordingly. He deliberately wants to see these "unwelcome facts as God's facts."¹ He is not suffering from the despair of the earthbound materialist. He is rather pleading for wisdom to live for the Lord in the face of the brevity and futility of human life. He is asking "for the willingness to live with the facts, for the grace to acknowledge and accept the nature of human life."²

Psalm 39 is not about the greed and emptiness of success enthusiasts who "rush about heaping up wealth," at least not in the way Psalm 73 comes down on this issue. Jeduthun, one of the chief musicians along with Asaph and Heman (1 Chron 16:41-42; 2 Chron 5:12), must set this psalm melodically with a different tone than Asaph did with Psalm 73. The issue is not the prosperity of the wicked but how to live for Yahweh when the measure of our lives is "a mere handbreadth." What are the two inches of my four fingers – the measure of my life – compared to the span of time? Nothing. So, then, how do I live? A similar concern is expressed in Psalm 90: "Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom" (Ps 90:12).

David's anguish over the brevity of life can be compared to the Son of David's consciousness of his "hour." Jesus framed the timing of his life in reference to the "hour." At the outset of his public ministry, at the wedding feast of Cana, Jesus revealed his consciousness of God's special timing when he said to his mother, "My hour has not come" (John 2:4). At Jacob's well, Jesus said to the Samaritan, "Woman, believe me, an hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. . . . Yet an hour is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and it truth. . . .(John 4:21, 23). In defending his authority and power, Jesus said to the religious leaders, "Very truly I tell you, an hour is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live" (John 5:25). The "already but not yet" nature of this pending *hour* affirms the meaning of Jesus' ministry in the light of the cross and the resurrection.

I am sure you will agree that nothing we do compares to Jesus' *hour* and what he accomplished on the cross for us. His once for all atoning sacrifice for our sins stands alone in significance and timing. Nevertheless he invites us to take up our cross *daily* and follow him. He penetrates the linear stream of *chronos* time with grace-filled *kairos* significance. In Christ, we acquire a sense of timing that corresponds to God's timing: special moments uniquely marked by the expectation and fulfillment of God's will and purpose for our lives. Jesus calls each one of us to take up our cross and follow him. For the sake of Christ and his kingdom we experience our own passion narrative.

The repetitive cycle of time gives way to those *kairos* moments when it seems that time itself stands still. The linear line of *chronos* time is punctuated by the pulsing heartbeat of meaning. We are truly alive and engaged with the mission of God. Jesus never said the *hour* would be easy. It will look and feel much more like a crucifixion than an awards ceremony. But instead of

¹ Kidner, Psalms, 156.

² Goldingay, Psalms, 557.

putting in time we will be filling up in real time “what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church” (Col 1:24). For the followers of Jesus Christ this is their finest hour.³

My Hope

*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 am no more.”*

Psalm 39:7-13

Does our interpretation of this final section depend on the worshiper’s confession, “My hope is in you,” or in his concluding plea of resignation, “Look away from me, that I may enjoy life again before I depart and am no more”?⁴ In the mind of the psalmist, the tension between hope and resignation remains. The struggle persists, but the more important fact is that his faith in Yahweh prevails. The meaning of hope is evident in his plea for forgiveness for past sins. His “transgressions” or “rebellions” appear to be “relatively isolated failures in a life characterized by faithfulness and insight.”⁵ Instead of complaining to faithless fools, he begs the Lord to end the chastening before it consumes him the way it has consumed his possessions. His hope is earnest. He turns to the Lord in three ways: “Hear *my prayer*, Lord, listen to *my cry* for help; do not be deaf to *my weeping*” (Ps 39:12). He implores the Lord to hear his silent prayer, to respond to his

³ Webster, *The God Who Prays*, 45-48.

⁴ Calvin, *Psalms*, 88. Calvin faults the psalmist for his conclusion: “We might, indeed, regard the prayer as allowable. . . . But we may easily infer, from the language which he employs, that his mind was so affected with the bitterness of his grief that he could not present a prayer pure and well seasoned with the sweetness of faith; for he says, ‘before I depart, and be no more’: a form of speech which indicates the feeling almost of despair” (88). Calvin’s perspective may have led Tim Keller to conclude, “The psalm ends without a note of hope, and that is instructive. It is remarkable that God not only allows his creatures to complain to him of their ills but actually records those wails in his Word” (*The Songs of Jesus*, 81). But as we have seen Psalm 39 offers a strong case for hope.

⁵ Goldingay, *Psalms*, 560.

loud cries, and to be moved by his weeping. Hope is also evident in his self-designation as an alien. In humility, he throws himself on the mercy of God claiming no other rights and privileges than a passing guest, a sojourner in transient. His resident alien status recalls the Lord's promise to love the "foreigner residing among you" (Deut 10:18; Lev 25:23).

The apostle Peter used this same language in his letter to the churches: "Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul" (1 Peter 2:11). He embraced the identity of the alien for the sake of the gospel so as to encourage resilient saints to remain faithful. Peter admonished, "Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us" (1 Peter 2:12). These "strangers on earth" were "looking for a country of their own. . . . They were longing for a better country – a heavenly one. There God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them" (Heb 11:14-16). Psalm 39 corresponds well with the struggle believers face in being a faithful presence in a world given over to other gods.

"The brevity of human life does not lead to determination to enjoy it while we can; it leads the suppliant 'to God and nothing but God.'"⁶ In spite of all his transgressions and his silent suffering under the heavy hand of God, the psalmist's only hope is in the Lord. Instead of choosing to rush around "heaping up wealth," he has chosen *someone*, not *something*. His posture before the Lord is one of repentance and gratitude. "The first grace of God's gift," wrote Augustine, is "to bring us to the confession of our infirmity" and the realization that "whatever good we can do, whatever ability we have," depends upon the Lord. For Christ's sake we delight in weaknesses, in difficulties, in hardships, and in persecutions, because when we are weak, then we are strong (2 Cor 12:10).⁷

This world is not my home. "I am a sojourner . . . in a place from which I will be removed," wrote Augustine. "The place where I am to abide for ever, should be called my home."⁸ We will no longer be sojourners when we arrive at the eternal home the Lord has prepared for us. "For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands" (2 Cor 5:1).

Our final Good Friday reminder is Jesus' upper room promise:

"My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am." John 14:2-3

We come to realize that searching for our true home in God is made difficult by living in a society that seeks to dismantle the connection between heaven and earth. We are a society of

⁶ Goldingay, Psalms, 559. Quoting W. A. M. Beuken, "Psalm 39," *Heythrop Journal* 19 (1978):1-11, see 4.

⁷ Augustine, Psalms, 117.

⁸ Augustine, Psalms, 118.

restless nomads looking for a little heaven on earth, defining our identity by appearances, insisting on relationships that meet our needs, and then wondering why we suffer from loneliness. Absorbed in our own life stories, we miss the opportunity to become involved in the greater drama of God's salvation history. In our lame attempt to give ourselves purpose, we reject the purpose God intends for us. If we are not careful we can grow accustomed to an endless search for meaning and purpose without ever expecting to find our true home. We can wrap our lives around small pursuits, like shopping or sports, to avoid having to deal with life. The sooner we realize that we are resident aliens made for a new heaven and a new earth the better off we'll be. Home is not where we are from, but where we are headed.

The psalmist's final plea, "Look away from me," recalls Job's lament when he said, ""What is mankind that you make so much of them, that you give them so much attention, that you examine them every morning and test them every moment? Will you never look away from me, or let me alone for an instant?" (Job 7:17-18). Believers can identify with this feeling. It sounds bad to the ears, but good to the heart. The psalmist's steadfast gaze is upon the sovereign Lord in whom he has entrusted himself completely. He is not rebellious, but dependent. His life is in the Lord's hands.