

Sorrow, Trouble, and Woe

Psalm 38:1 *A Psalm of David, for the memorial offering.
A Psalm of David. A handful of incense, a good memorial for
Israel. PsTg
A Psalm of David for remembrance concerning the Sabbath-
day. LXX*

O LORD, rebuke me not in your anger, nor discipline me in your wrath!

² For your arrows have sunk into me, and your hand has come down on me.

³ There is no soundness in my flesh because of your indignation; there is no health in my bones because of my sin.

⁴ For my iniquities have gone over my head; like a heavy burden, they are too heavy for me.

⁵ My wounds stink and fester because of my foolishness,

⁶ I am utterly bowed down and prostrate; all the day I go about mourning.

⁷ For my sides are filled with burning, and there is no soundness in my flesh.

⁸ I am feeble and crushed; I groan because of the tumult of my heart.

⁹ O Lord, all my longing is before you; my sighing is not hidden from you.

¹⁰ My heart throbs; my strength fails me, and the light of my eyes-- it also has gone from me.

¹¹ My friends and companions stand aloof from my plague, and my nearest kin stand far off.

¹² Those who seek my life lay their snares; those who seek my hurt speak of ruin and meditate treachery all day long.

¹³ But I am like a deaf man; I do not hear, like a mute man who does not open his mouth.

¹⁴ I have become like a man who does not hear, and in whose mouth are no rebukes.

¹⁵ But for you, O LORD, do I wait; it is you, O Lord my God, who will answer.

¹⁶ For I said, "Only let them not rejoice over me, who boast against me when my foot slips!"

¹⁷ For I am ready to fall, and my pain is ever before me.

¹⁸ I confess my iniquity; I am sorry for my sin.

¹⁹ But my foes are vigorous, they are mighty, and many are those who hate me wrongfully.

²⁰ Those who render me evil for good accuse me because I follow after good.

²¹ Do not forsake me, O LORD! O my God, be not far from me!

²² Make haste to help me, O Lord, my salvation!

Psalm 39:1 *To the choirmaster: to Jeduthun.*

For Praise: Concerning the Guard of the sanctuary, according to Juduthun. PsTg

For the End, a Song of David, to Idithun. LXX

A Psalm of David. I said, "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."

² I was mute and silent; I held my peace to no avail, and my distress grew worse.

³ My heart became hot within me. As I mused, the fire burned; then I spoke with my tongue:

⁴ "O LORD, make me know my end and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting I am!

⁵ Behold, you have made my days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing before you. Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath!
Selah

⁶ 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!

⁷ "And now, O Lord, for what do I wait? My hope is in you.

⁸ Deliver me from all my transgressions. Do not make me the scorn of the fool!

⁹ I am mute; I do not open my mouth, for it is you who have done it.

¹⁰ Remove your stroke from me; I am spent by the hostility of your hand.

¹¹ 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! Selah

¹² "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.

Psalm 38-39

A Cappadocian Father

GREGORY OF NYSSA LIVED C. 335 – 395. As well as his brother Basil and a second **Gregory (of Nazianzus)** also known as Gregory the Theologian, he is known as one of the famed **Cappadocian Fathers**, both for where he (they) lived and ministered, and how he (they) fought valiantly for the Christian Faith during his life. Well, not Gregory's *entire* life.

Cappadocia is one of the provinces of the Roman Empire represented at Peter's sermon on Pentecost in Acts

2. **Nyssa** sits in almost the exact center of the western 2/3 of today's modern nation of Turkey. Gregory's family was deeply religious. Both sets of grandparents were Christian. His mother **Emmelia**'s grandfather was martyred, and her parents lost all their sizeable possessions during the persecutions of **Diocletian** (they later got most of them back). Her brother (Gregory's uncle) became Bishop of Caesarea, a large town to Nyssa's east.



The Cappadocian Fathers

- **Gregory the Theologian of Nazianzus** (329-389)
- **Basil the Great of Caesarea** (330-379)
- **Gregory of Nyssa** (335-395)
- **Peter of Sebaste** (340 - 391; brother of Basil, but not considered a Cappadocian)

His siblings followed suit. His younger brother **Peter** became bishop of a large town far to northeast of Cappadocia, while his older brother became **Basil the Great**—bishop of Caesarea. Another younger brother **Naucratius** was on the fast track to becoming a lawyer but died too young age for his dream to be realized. Yet though a secular vocation, his desire was to give himself over to a life of asceticism, as did their oldest sibling, a sister **Macrina**, named after her grandmother, who became a nun after her arranged marriage fell apart due to the death of the groom.

As for Gregory, in awe of his older brother, he followed in Basil's **secular training** and learned to love the philosophers.¹ But unlike Basil, he did not turn it into a Christian education and he did not want a career in the Church. Still, he adored his older brother, even referring to him in a letter to Peter as "**our father and our master.**" After much persistence from Basil to change his mind, other friends were employed in the matter, all in vain. He began to **teach rhetoric** and was pursuing life in secular academia.

¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Ascetical Works*, trans. Virginia Woods Callahan, vol. 58, The Fathers of the Church (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1967), xi.

Tradition says that Gregory was married, not exactly the way to follow your siblings into the monastic tradition.² Whether his wife or perhaps a sister, some young woman in Gregory's life **died** rather suddenly, and this had a profound impact upon the man. After a long time reflecting upon it, he who finally gave in to Basil's pleadings. Like the reluctant prophet, he was installed by Basil as a bishop after finally giving up the idea of the office's "repugnance."³ He was reluctantly **ordained** in 371.

Gregory did not have his brother's keen administrative gifts and soon Basil's enemies, agents of the Arian emperor, turned against the younger brother, forcing him out of ministry because of "**mismanagement of the diocese.**"⁴ Twice he was brought up on fraudulent charges, and in 374 he was deposed and banished. Only after Valens' death in 378 was he returned from his exile. But very soon, within the year in fact, Basil the Great—his hero and mentor—would **die**. Gregory was shattered. With two, possibly three

² On whether he was married, see the fascinating discussion in Vasiliki Limberis, *Architects of Piety: The Cappadocian Fathers and the Cult of the Martyrs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 110-118.

³ "St. Gregory of Nyssa," Catholic Encyclopedia, *New Advent*, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07016a.htm>, last accessed 3-21, 2017.

⁴ Callahan, xii.

siblings now dead, he went to seek solace from his oldest sister Macrina who was still living. Gregory recounts what happened next in a genius work that takes the form of a dialogue between he and his sister titled *On the Soul and Resurrection*:

At the time that Basil, great among the saints, left the life of man and went to God and a common onset of grief descended upon the Churches, my sister and teacher was still alive and I hurried to her to tell her the sad news about our brother.⁵ Alas, when we came before each other's eyes, the sight of the teacher only rekindled the passion, for she too was already in the grip of a mortal illness ... My soul drooped, my face fell dejected, and the tears streamed from my eyes.⁶

In the book, Gregory depicts “the torrents of his grief,” the “abandonment of his reason,” the “disorder of his soul,”

⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and Resurrection* 1.1; in *Ascetical Works*, 198–199.

⁶ This last part is a translation in Hans C. Boersma, “Hope-Bridled Grief,” *First Things* (Jan 2012): 45–49. <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2012/01/hope-bridled-grief>. Original: “I think he switched the original for emotional impact, “My soul was sorrowful as I suffered the pain of this affliction and I was seeking someone to share my tears, someone whose burden of pain was equal to my own. As we met each other, the sight of my teacher reawakened the grief within me for she was already ill and close to death.”

the “numbness of his grief,” whereby he was sepi up wholly to lamentations. Loss of precious family like this can certainly be an occasion for such extreme anguish. But it isn’t the only thing that causes such torment and woe. Our Psalms today talk about other causes of angst and anguish, no less serious. All of this this leads to the question of [the appropriateness of grief](#) in the face of bereavement.⁷ How are we to deal with it? What forms can it take and not become sinful? How do you deal with someone going through it? The answers that arise from Psalms 38-39 are profound and life-changing.

Psalms of Lament

Psalms 38-39 form the middle of the last unit of Book 1 of the Psalter (Ps 34/35-41). They are both categorized as songs of lament. Someone has called them “[twin psalms](#).” They share themes of [resolution to silence before enemies](#) (38:13–14; 39:1–2); [urgent appeal for reprieve from severe illness](#) (38:21–22; 39:8, 10, 12); [acknowledgment that the illness is a divine rebuke for sin](#) (38:1, 3; 39:9); [confession of](#)

⁷ See Boersma.

sin (38:13–14, 18; 39:8); and declaration of trust in the Lord (38:15, 22; 39:7).⁸ They link suffering, sickness, and sin most vividly.⁹ One of the disorienting facts of both songs is that they leave the great tension of suffering unresolved. As such, they are “some of the darkest [psalms], reflecting the desperation of the sick.”¹⁰ They form the lowest point in the first collection of Psalms.¹¹ Ironically, though it was Macrina who was sick, she was not the desperate one. That title belonged to Gregory who was all too well. But in the Psalm, David is the sick one. He is so intensely effected by it he is close to death like Macrina, but his emotions are raw like Gregory.

Fortunately, the book ends in Psalms 40-41 which are linked thematically to our psalms with the concept of sin, but give us much hope unlike most our songs today, though

⁸ Walther Zimmerli, “Zwillingspsalmen,” in *Wort, Lied, and Gottesspruch: Beiträge zu Psalmen und Propheten*, ed. J. Schreiner (Würzburg/Stuttgart: Echter, 1972), pp. 105–13 in Bruce K. Waltke, James M. Houston, and Erika Moore, *The Psalms as Christian Lament: A Historical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 160.

⁹ Willem A. VanGemenen, Psalms, in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary Revised Ed.*, ed. Tremper Longman III & David E. Garland (HarperCollins, 2017), 311.

¹⁰ St. Meinrad Archabbey, *The Tradition of Catholic Prayer*, ed. Christian Raab and Harry Hagan (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007), 10-11.

¹¹ VanGemenen, *ibid.*

there is some hope even here as see in the structure of Psalm 38 for example:

- A. Appeal to God (v. 2)
- B. Sin as Cause of Sickness (3-4)
- C. Confession of Sin (5-6)
- D. Complaint of symptoms of sickness (7-11)
- E. Enemies (12-13)
- F. Hope in the Lord (14-16)**
- E¹. Enemies (17)
- D¹. Complaint of Symptoms of Sickness (18)
- C¹. Confession of Sin (19)
- B¹. Plight without Cause (20-21)
- A¹. Appeal to God (22-23)¹²

Even though they also have some lament for suffering, 40-41 are filled with thanksgiving and praise for deliverance. But our songs are not, and in fact Psalm 39 is even more desperate than 38 and thus we are going to be forced to deal with some unsettling things by them without resolution this week in order to force us to come to terms with some important theology.

¹² Samuel L. Terrien, p. 325-26.

Psalm 38

Psalm 38 shares some themes with Psalm 37, especially the idea of enemies and Yahweh's anger against him.¹³ Waltke calls it “truly a great piece of literature” where “the psalmist enables his reader to feel his eventual numbness from his unremitting pain by his unrelenting verbal depictions of them.”¹⁴ In this sense, we might say that it is a complete song not for giving us answers, but for showing us the pain of suffering and how it is that a Christian can deal with it before God.

The literary form suggests this on a subconscious level in that it has 22 verses, i.e. the number of the Hebrew alphabet.¹⁵ This is curious because Psalm 37 is an acrostic Psalm with each new letter usually skipping a verse. The connection is even deeper with the last letter (*tav*) in 37:39 being the word “salvation” (*teshuah*) which matches the last verse of 38, “Make haste to help me, O Lord, my salvation”

¹³ Howard N. Wallace, “Psalms,” *Readings: A New Biblical Commentary*, ed. John Jarick (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009), 80.

¹⁴ Waltke, 134.

¹⁵ Thus far in the Psalter, see Psalm 25 which is an acrostic Psalm with 22 verses. Also Psalm 33 has 22 verses and is followed by an acrostic Psalm (34).

(38:22).¹⁶ So the placement of the psalms together suggests its completeness of thought. Therefore, **what is the teaching of Psalm 38?** It is clearly different from Psalm 37. Waltke calls it *The Dance between Deserved and Undeserved Suffering*.¹⁷

Psalm 38 begins as “**A Psalm of David, for the memorial offering.**” The offering here seems to be himself! It reminds me of the Apostle Paul near the end of his life when he writes, “**Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all**” (Php 2:17). He seems to have been talking about his imminent death at the hands of the Romans. **Isaiah 57:6** uses very similar language, and two verses later the prophet calls this their “memorial.” Given the nature of the coming sufferings in this Psalm, is it any wonder that the Fathers understood the ultimate speaker here as the Suffering Servant: Our Lord Jesus Christ?

The song begins, “**O LORD, rebuke me not in your anger, no discipline me in your wrath.**” He begins (and ends) his song with an appeal to Yahweh. In the previous song, wrath and anger were what the psalmist was feeling (**Ps**

¹⁶ In Waltke, 133.

¹⁷ Waltke, 122.

37:8). Now, perhaps because of them, he pleads with God not to inflict His wrath upon him.

An important question needs to be asked here so that we do not misunderstand the song. Does God inflict “wrath” and “anger” upon his child of faith? Certainly not end times wrath on the day of judgment. “For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1Thess 5:9). But even wrath and anger in the temporal realm are not things God pours out on his people of faith. Discipline? Yes. Chastisement? Certainly. But wrath? Anger? No. So is David mistaken to ask this if it can’t be true? No. We will see later that he knows in his mind what God is doing. But this is coming from the depths of his soul, and basically he is saying that if God were to pour this out on him, he couldn’t bear it. Therefore, please remember your covenantal promise not to do it.

What would make him feel this way? Vs. 2. “For your arrows have sunk into me, and your hand has come down on me.” Beginning here and through the end of the psalm, Augustine sees this as being fulfilled in Christ like when he cries out from Psalm 22, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” It is certainly right and true to interpret it this

way. But to make us feel more of the power of what he went through for us, let's think more about the original context with David, because he was prone to sin and doubt like we are.

Because these arrows are so intensely penetrating and sharp, David's mind begins to wonder if maybe this isn't wrath after all. Have you ever felt that way? It is human to do so. In this way, it is like **Job** and some (see Cassiodorus) have been reminded of Job throughout this Psalm. So he cries out. It is worth noting that the **Bible here never says it is wrong to cry out like this from such pain**. It is also worth knowing that some (see Ambrose) have seen—like the Job story—**the devil** at work here, even though we get no overt language in the Psalm that God is using the devil against David here.¹⁸

Something else has happened. **David's body has gotten terribly sick**. “**There is no soundness in my flesh because of your indignation; there is no health in my bones...**” (**Ps 38:3**). God's displeasure is taking its toll not only inwardly, but outwardly. And this will become important later in the song as well. But just when we think that David might

¹⁸ This does seem to happen in David's life though. Compare **1Ch 21:1** and **2Sa 24:1**.

blame God, he turns. “There is no health in my bones *because of my sin*. For my iniquities have gone over my head; like a heavy burden, they are too heavy for me. My wounds stink and fester because of my foolishness” (3b-5). He clearly sees what is happening to him as originating in his own wickedness. In other words, *God is punishing me and it is what I deserve*. Have you ever felt *this* way? If it makes you feel any better, so did the greatest king of Israel. Is it true?

Don't feel alone if you don't know the answer. Commentators struggle with it too. One person says, “It is easier ... to find yourself guilty of some sin than to admit how helpless you really are;”¹⁹ and, “When there is no meaning, then helplessness is intensified. This seems the case in Psalm 38.”²⁰ While it is possible that this is very much like Job and he in fact didn't do anything *specifically* wrong to deserve this and he is actually thinking more like Job's counselors than he is like Job, it is also possible that he did do something. We know for sure that he *thinks* he did, and as Spurgeon says, “Nothing so pulls a man down from all

¹⁹ David A. Bosworth, “Faith and Resilience: King David's Reaction to the Death of Bathsheba's Firstborn,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 73, no. 4 (Oct. 2011): 691–707. Cited in Waltke, 123.

²⁰ Waltke, *Ibid*.

loftiness as a sense of sin and of divine wrath concerning it.”²¹

As you think about this song, know that this is part of living with the **ambiguity of being sinful people**. Sometimes God disciplines us for our sin in serious ways. Other times sickness comes for absolutely nothing that we have done directly on the moral level. In Job’s case, it was because he was the most *blameless* man on the face of the earth and God simply wanted to show his glory through the suffering of Job. In Christ’s case, it was because of someone else’s sin that he suffered. In Gregory’s case, it wasn’t himself, but his sister. She was dying, and seemingly not because of some specific sin she had committed (but only in the more general sense that she, like everyone, is a sinner). This is part of the dance between deserved and undeserved suffering.

But so that you can *feel* the pain, something we are prone not to want to do, a long series of crushing descriptions are given. “**My wounds stink and fester**” (5). **Luther** translates it, “**My sores have come to stink or smell badly and have**

²¹ C. H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David: Psalms 27-57*, vol. 2 (London; Edinburgh; New York: Marshall Brothers, n.d.), 199.

decomposed,”²² and interprets it spiritually meaning that his sin and wickedness had become known to others and [as we will see] became a cause of scandal. “But in this sense the whole human race has come to stink (‘To some an odor to death, to others an odor of life to life’ 2Co 2:16).

“I am utterly bowed down and prostrate; all the day I go about mourning” (6). He weeps. He is humble. But he is festering in sickness. It is a heavy burden. “My sides are filled with burning, and there is no soundness in my flesh” (7). It seems to have taken hold in his lower back or thighs or gut where Calvin—taking it literally says he is “filled with an inflammatory disease, or at least were covered over with putrid sores; for these parts of the body are most subject to inflammation, and most liable to contract putrid humours.”²³ As someone who has lived with sometimes radical stomach pain that keels you over in wave after wave of the most intense agony imaginable, I can feel something of his pain.

²² Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 10: First Lectures on the Psalms I: Psalms 1-75*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, electronic ed., vol. 10 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 178.

²³ John Calvin and James Anderson, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, vol. 2 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 60.

“I am feeble and crushed; I groan because of the tumult of my heart” (8).” My heart throbs; my strength fails me, and the light of my eyes—it also has gone from me” (10). So debilitating is the physical pain and the emotional pain of thinking he has done something to deserve God’s anger against him that **his entire heart is broken** and shattered. And so he lays bare his longing, his sighing, his moaning before the Lord (9). There is no way he can keep them in. It comes out whether he wants it to or not. This is the raw emotion of someone in extreme agony. Have you been there?

But his problem now takes **a turn for the worse**, if that were possible. We saw it hinted at with Luther. “**My friends and companions stand aloof from my plague, and my nearest kin stand far off**” (11). When Job’s friend first saw his predicament, they just sat there, silent, for seven days. But David’s friends actually move away from him because of what they see. He must have looked like some dying survivor of a horrible car wreck. The natural impulse is not to go near, but to run away. I’ve never been so bad off that this has happened to me.

But then a new group appears. “**Those who seek my life**” (12). They “**lay snares**” and “**seek my hurt**” and

meditate on treachery all day long. But as if that weren't bad enough, they “speak of ruin.” What ruin? Well, the Psalmists', of course. But *what kind of ruin?* Let us remember that they arrive in context because of his agony and sickness. **Vv. 16-17** explain, “For I said, ‘Only let them not rejoice over me, who boast against me when my foot slips!’ For I am ready to fall, and my pain is ever before me.” It seems probable that they are using his illness as excuse to attack him; they are horrified at what they think he must have done to deserve this (wicked people often try to justify their wicked behavior on what they consider to be solid theological doctrinal grounds, so they can be justified in doing harm. And certainly the idea that people get what they deserve has been common in every age).

Feel then the compounded pain of David who is now being hunted by sinister men-of-the-cloth if you will, men who justify any and every attack against him under the pretense of righteousness. And this is while he is already nearly at death's door because of what has been happening to him because of his own sins. Feel the horrible agony that was therefore our Savior's who had all of this happen to him

and he didn't do anything to deserve it. And he did it for you!

The only **truly hopeful verse** in this psalm is the middle verse (structurally speaking) of Psalm 38. “**But for you, O LORD, do I wait; it is you, O Lord my God, who will answer**” (38:15). It is central not in that it is trying to focus attention away from the suffering, for the Psalm doesn't end on this note at all. It is central because the basic teaching of the Psalm is that no matter how horrible life gets, no matter how horrible you think you are and how much you think God may be punishing you for what you have done, no matter if enemies attack you or if your body collapses under the weight of illness, no matter if your mind seems lost in pain so that it can't think properly, **you must not—you will not—let go of your hope in God**. Faith clings to hope in Christ, for it is all that it has.

He is called here “**Yahweh,**” “**Adonai,**” and “**Elohim.**” He is Yahweh, the God of the covenant promises who never changes: I AM. He is Adonai, Lord. David's Lord. He is Elohim: his Elohim. He will not turn to another god. He will not forsake faith in this God. No matter what he has done, he trusts that the Lord will answer him. This is the

very essence and heart of faith. It is what everyone one of you here today claim to have, if you take the name Christian upon yourself. It is the kind of faith He gives to his saints, and it is obviously a gift, because no one would keep this up of his own freewill. It just isn't possible. Not under this much duress. That is why it is central, and no matter what else we look at today, this is where your eyes must be focused, even as they were for our Lord when he committed his spirit into the hands of his Father, even after just having asked him why he had forsaken him. This and only this is what pleases God—to trust and rest in him. No matter what.

But as I said, the Psalm's current takes you away from this island, only allowing you to glimpse it for the briefest of moments. This is because this Psalm and the next are really forcing you to **come to grips with suffering and pain**, something many of us do not want to do, something that seems too pious for godly folk who must suck it up and tough it out and pull their emotional distress (which is often viewed as evil) up by their doctrinal bootstraps (which alone are good). David doesn't seem to agree—not with doctrine being good, but with emotions being evil. He wants you to know how to deal with it properly.

Three ways show themselves here at the end, though the honest lamentation and crying out have already given us something to chew on. **First**, my guess is, he has to be thinking that if there is anything he can do to alleviate God's dark hand upon him, he will try. **"I confess my iniquity; I am sorry for my sin"** (18). But he isn't doing it merely to get out of the suffering. He knows that God is just to do to him anything that he wants. But notice that his **heart is not hardened** by the view that he is paying for what he has done. Rather, he repents of his sin and tells you about it! He models **the proper action** if you think God is chastising you for what you have done. Confess it before him. Do not hold that back. Repent of it, turn away and walk once more down the narrow path.

Second, remember your innocence. This seems strange. It was for Martin Luther who would spend hours a day in monastery confessing his sins, never getting relief, until he realized the meaning of the Gospel and justification. For David this meant thinking about his enemies again and how there was at least a kind of suffering that he did not deserve. **"But my foes are vigorous, they are mighty, and many are those who hate me wrongfully. Those who render me evil**

for good accuse me because I follow after good” (19-20). Isn't this a fascinating admission immediately after confessing sin? They repay him evil for good (as we have seen in previous psalms). Earlier in the song, he said that he is like a “deaf man” who does not hear, a “mute man” who does not speak and in whom are no rebukes (13-14). The idea seems to be that he refused to answer back his accusers. He did them good.

But it reminds us of Jesus. For Jesus, he was totally innocent of every sin all the time. For you, like Luther, *you are innocent through his suffering*, for he died that you might be acquitted of your sin, that the wrath of God might not fall upon you, that he might present you a pure and spotless lamb, a beautiful and holy virgin before the throne of God. All Christians, OT or NT feel what David says here. They sin. Yet they seek the good. They sin. Yet they are declared not guilty. You must remember that Christ has justified you if you have trusted in him by faith alone.

Third, you put your trust in the LORD no matter what he should decide the outcome will be. “Do not forsake me, O LORD! O my God, be not far from me! Make haste to help me, O Lord, my salvation!” (21-22). Again, the three

words for God appear. This time, his focus returns to the first verse. He pleads with God not to remove his good-pleasure from David even though he is sinful. He cannot stand to have God leave him. He needs his salvation. This is a far worse thought for a Christian than even the worse kind of physical pain. And it is how the Psalm ends. Without resolution. Without an answer. We are forced to deal with the suffering.

Psalm 39

Curiously, Psalm 39 doesn't relieve the distress. If anything, it exacerbates it. It is “to the choirmaster [for The End]. To Jeduthun,” probably another way of saying Ethan, one of the three court-prophet-singers appointed by David (1Ch 25:1). The point is clear. David wanted this one sung publicly. This was not up to some later king or priest to add to the psalter. He obviously thought it was very important.

The theme picks up kind of where we left off: “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. I was mute and silent...” (Ps 39:1-2a). We saw

this previously (38:13-14). But now we learn that it was “to no avail, and my distress grew worse” (2). How can you not think of our Lord who, because he kept his mouth shut, went silently like a sheep to the slaughter?

Keeping your mouth shut in the face of great evil against you is one of the most difficult things to do. One reason is because you could end up paying severely for it because wicked people distort and use the silence to their own advantage (of course, they will do that with your words as well). Nevertheless, it is often the *right* thing to do, because when we open our mouths in cases like this, it is usually in retaliation, and this is not the way of the Lord for his people. Thus, vs. 3, “My heart became hot within me. As I mused, the fire burned...” Imagine what he would have said to his enemies with a heart on fire like this? When the opportunity presents itself and you are attacked for doing good, remember that the right thing may also be for you the way of the silent cross itself. And it may very well be that you alone, or perhaps just a friend or two, will ever know what you did. But it will be the right thing, and you will know.

Nevertheless, David does speak (3b). You can't hold such a thing like this in. It isn't possible. But he doesn't speak

to his enemies; he speaks to Yahweh. What he says now becomes quite unexpected. He detaches himself from the suffering and becomes the philosopher—the lover of wisdom. Solomon got it from his father.

“O LORD, make me know my end and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting I am!” (4). What is the answer to the hot anger that arises when enemies attack? To know your own place in the grand scheme of things. This is wisdom: “Behold, you have made my days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing before you” (5a). You must come to realize the shortness of life, because one day very soon you will stand before the judgment seat of God. This keeps you humble and helps you not want to retaliate, knowing that one day the tables will be turned and that Great Day.

“Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath” (5b). This is such a profound point that the first “*selah*” in seven psalms appears. Pause and reflect. “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!” (6). This moves the focus squarely onto the wicked. The point is, when you realize that *their* lives are the blink of an eye, that

they are saving up for nothing, that their end will be judgment, that their miserable lives now that are making your life miserable will one day be even worse, it also tempers your need to justify yourself or to speak out in whatever way your temper wants you to. This is terribly important and ultra-practical.

This song has as its center **vv. 7-10**.

- A. Autobiographical Reflection (1-4)
- B. Ephemerality of Man (5-7)
- C. Affirmation of Hope (7-10)**
- B¹. Ephemerality of Man (11-12)
- A¹. Autobiographical Reflection (13-14)²⁴

Similar to the center of the last song is **vs. 7**, “**And now, O Lord, for what do I wait? My hope is in you.**” He puts his hope in the future into the hands of the Lord, though he does not know what that will mean. Thus, he asks him in prayer, “**Deliver me from all my transgressions**” (**8a**). The same pattern as the last song emerges. This is a confession of sin

²⁴ **Samuel L. Terrien**, p. 331.

and asking God not to hold them against him. He needs to be delivered from them and their consequences.

Why? The stated reason is because he does not want to be made the scorn of the fool! (8b). This is probably the man who says that David is suffering because of his sins and therefore seeks to harm him, because David's response is again to say nothing to him (9a). And yet, now, reflecting the ever-deepening turmoil of the soul that despite his best reasoning isn't going away, the psalmist has come to the point where he won't even open his mouth to the LORD. Why?

“I do not open my mouth, for it is you who have done it” (9b). He recognizes God's sovereignty in the pain. Yet, this needs some important discussion. While certainly a true confession in the ultimate sense (David probably had read Job after all), and while it is therefore good theology to have, you must again notice the context of this. God's sovereignty here is brought up in the context of a deeply hurting man. Far too often, God's sovereignty is wielded (by those who still believe in it any more) like a club to beat stupid people up who either don't seem to believe it, or who at that moment seem to have forgotten it. But this topic is of such

a high and yet deep mystery that if you use it the wrong way, it could absolutely devastate a person. For we are not just brains in a vat. We have emotions and at this moment, they are raw.

I believe that if a person is a true Christian, they already know God's sovereignty is true, whether they confess it exactly the way that I do or not. But this starts to get at the heart of the trouble with agony. The irony about what I'm about to say is that I will talk about God's sovereignty over suffering, but the situation needs to be right. Like now, when we are more objectively looking at the suffering of another, rather than going through it ourselves. Nevertheless, give me a hearing.

As reactionaries to those who only seem to care about feelings, where truth matters not a wit, Reformed people can sometimes be quite good at knocking emotions down (some might believe they are evil), and building in their place this almost stoic theology with a God who is absolutely impervious in any possible sense to change and suffering, even the sense of personally relating to his creation (*ad extra* or outside of his eternal inner workings in the Trinity) and

therefore we should be too. In fact, I've known men who have bragged about this very point.

Now, God doesn't change in his being, nature, or essence. And his essence is not susceptible to the emotional whims of man, as if we could somehow "hurt" God. And yet, God does deal with his creation on a personal level, most notably through the God-man who suffered when he became a human, and through the Holy Spirit whom we are said to be able to "grieve" in our sin.

Sadly, when someone is hurting deeply over a loss or a sickness or whatever, rather than coming beside a person who is in such deep grief and just letting them mourn and mourning with them, in just letting them talk and being silent with them, our natural impulse is to tell them all that they have been thinking that is wrong, so that they can fix it. Fix what? Fix their emotional instability. It is quite possible that we really don't want them to grieve, because it makes us too uncomfortable. Perhaps because we ourselves don't do a very good job at it. And fix it we must! With God's sovereignty. "Don't you know God is sovereign over this in your life? Why are you so hurt then?" And we sound like Job's counselors.

But listen to the profundity of this as it involves suffering. David holds his tongue in recognition of God's sovereignty over the pain. It is the exact opposite impulse we often have. Then there is what follows. "... 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! Selah. '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'" (9b-12).

What is there to even say at this point? David seems to have come to the end of his rope. He knows he is a vapor, which makes him feel tiny and meaningless. He is completely spent, not even from the physical pain, but from the feelings that are associated with knowing that his God is the source of such hostility. He knows that God is behind it. And he knows it is because of his sin. And he knows full well with his mind that this is not something that is because God hates him. He knows that it is discipline. But that doesn't make it any easier. Hebrews tells us, "For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant."

The Psalm does not allow us to move onto the last part of that verse, because this is taken up more in the next two songs. Rather, we need to stay here and understand this profound point of pain. It really is painful. It gets to the point where David no longer feels like God is his Father. The metaphor switches to him as a [sojourner](#), and thus he is at the complete mercy of God, whom he knows takes care of the sojourners in his land. But the familiarity seems so distant. All he can do is cry out and hope that God will hold his peace in his tears.

Such is the way our two songs end. The tension is unresolved. We are left contemplating how we should understand pain, how we should react to it. Even greats like Calvin think that David is wrong in the way he responds here. Is he? Should we be trying to fix David? Is his emotional attachment getting the better of his judgment?

With this in mind, let me return for one last moment to Gregory. It isn't that Gregory's *story* here is that much like David's story, so much as it is that the way Gregory learns to deal with this topic is of so much help.²⁵ When you are going through difficult times, or when you have to be with

²⁵ Waltke brought him up in the context of the overview of Psalm 38, p. 122.

others who are, consider the words of his teacher—this dear older sister. Then consider how he took this through the remaining days of his own life.

Gregory and Macrina were at two opposite ends of the spectrum. For her part, as she lay dying, she was the voice of calmness and reason. As he tells is, “She endeavored to bridle me with words and steer with the bit of her own reasoning the disorder of my soul. The apostolic saying put forward by her was: ‘It is not right to grieve for those who are asleep, since we are told that sorrow belongs only to those who have no hope’” (1Th 4:13). She is adamant that the feeling of grief is a failure of the theological virtue of hope. In short, grief is a mistake. This actually seems to be Gregory’s view as well. Kind of. Again, they are dealing with death, and David’s situation is a bit different. Still, I think many would apply the sentiment no matter what.²⁶ So Gregory took this to heart. Yet he did so in a most amazing way.

²⁶ **Going Deeper:** Bergsma has the fascinating translation, “... for this is the passion only of those who have no hope.” Passions were viewed by many throughout history, both pagan and Christian, as things that must be avoided at all costs. They are plagues upon mankind, the negative emotions that are only vices, not virtues in any sense. I don’t have the original text to see if Gregory is quoting Scripture or paraphrasing it.

I find this fascinating because in the past four years I have been surrounded with a controversy over the *impassibility of God* (and the larger issue of divine simplicity), where some are taking a very strict, Thomistic view of impassibility that has more to do with the Greek pagan Unmoved Mover than it does with the Bible. Furthermore, the Cappadocian Fathers were among those

After his sister died, Gregory really took over as leader of the church in that entire area of the world. As an influential pastor, he began doing funerals for some pretty important people. Despite his theological view, he nevertheless time and again says things like this: “For look how in a short time we have been gripped by such evils. Not yet recovered from the earlier blow, the tear not yet wiped from the eyes, we again experience terrible misfortune.” He encourages his audience to weep and mourn. He enters into their suffering with them. How can we reconcile this discrepancy? Is the theologian at odds with the pastor? Is Gregory schizophrenic?

No more than David is. Though he enters into the pain, he always points the people to the hope that his sister pointed him to. This is [the hope](#) that David points us to and himself to. It is so hard to see it through the pain. Sometimes, it seems impossible. Yet, it is there. It is there through the Suffering Servant who felt the same things

who held that such views in the church in their day were actually being advanced *by the Arians*, and that Trinitarian theology, while holding to a form of impassibility and divine simplicity, had to get this theology from the Scripture. The article by Bergsma really contrasts how Gregory’s thought compared to these others. For a more technical discussion see [Andrew Radde-Gallwitz](#), *Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and the Transformation of Divine Simplicity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

David did, but as the God-man. Through Christ, God is not indifferent to the pain even of our sins, for Christ bore them on his body on that accursed tree. David could see this only dimly through prophecy. You get it in history and by the Spirit.

Through the discipline of suffering, even for our sins, or even not(!), the Lord is pointing us to the need for humility, repentance, to rethink the transience and impermanence of this life. Yet, in Christ, these psalms are future oriented not just in his Passion, but also in his return, when he will wipe away every tear from our eye, and there will be no more sorrow or shame or suffering. Though you see the hope dimly through a dark glass in the psalms, still the hope is there. All this without really solving the existential problem itself in the songs.

Will you to enter into the suffering of such things so that he might conform you to the image of the Lord Jesus? Can you become equally comfortable with lament and with good theology, with right doctrine and with being a human who feels things, with being quiet when others suffer and with crying out to the God who is sovereign over it? The work of bearing the punishment for your sins is finished. And he

is waiting on the other side, where one day soon, all our grief will be borne away too. Forever.