

A Passing Foreigner?

Psalm 39

When we get away from the familiar psalms we find ones that can be unsettling, because of how honest they are. Today's psalm is like that: the writer wants God, but he also wants God to turn away from him.

The Silence of Suffering

Our mouths often get us into trouble. David knew that, and in his suffering he did not want to say the wrong things. Times of success and times of suffering can be times of testing because they can reveal what we are really like. What we say in times of difficulty says a lot about what we really believe – about God and about life.

David wants to speak out, but he also knows that unbelievers are watching, and he does not want to give them a reason to criticize God, so he stays silent. But it is not a sulky silence. Instead, he begins to speak to himself and then to God.

The Shortness of Life

CS Lewis described pain as God's megaphone. When David speaks to God, he wants to learn the lesson that pain and suffering can teach: that this life is very short. It is a crucial lesson we must learn, because it stops us wasting our lives.

But it's not just the shortness of life that troubles David, it is the seeming meaningless of life and suffering as well. And we think, deep down, that life should not be this way, and the Bible agrees with us.

And David knows that the only place he will find an answer to the turmoil of his heart is God. The problem is that his relationship with God is seriously strained.

The Sting of Sin

We should be extremely cautious about suggesting that someone is suffering because of their sin. However, David acknowledges that his pain is due to his sin. His sin has had consequences for his physical life, and for his relationship with God. If we refuse to own our sin, we harden our hearts. But if we admit and confess our sin, we soften our hearts and our relationship with God can deepen. That is the path that David chooses.

David feels like a foreigner before God – with a gulf between them. He wants God, but he also knows that God must deal with his sin. And that means more pain. So whilst he wants God he also wants God to turn away from him. We want God to smile upon us, but how can he if he is righteous and we are not?

The Smile of God

Inside each of us is a longing for permanence, for Eden, for our relationship with God and with others to be restored, to know the smile of God upon us. But how can God do that if he is to deal with our sin?

Jesus, David's greatest Son, came as a man, and faced all the suffering of humanity. He too stood silent before the wicked. He suffered and died for sin, but for ours, not his. The Father turned away from Jesus so that he could turn his smile towards us. In Jesus we no longer need be foreigners, but can find our home with him. Through his resurrection we know that death is not the end, our lives are not pointless, not even our sufferings.