

Psalm 39

Watch Your Ways

(t/h - m:25 Feb 18)

Psalm 39 is attributed to David and it's far from being a psalm of praise. This is part of a series of psalms where David prays to God for mercy and protection from his enemies. The theme of David calling on God for help begins in psalm 35 and continues through to Psalm 39. If you get a moment over the next few days, read these psalms and you will see how psalm 35 has David asking God to fight his enemies but by psalm 39, David has moved to a place within himself where he's asking God to save him from himself.

David actually covers a lot of ground in this short psalm. In verses 1 to 3, he asked God for self-control so he doesn't verbally lash out at his enemies. Then in verses 4 to 6, he acknowledges that his life is insignificant, his possessions are nothing when compared to God's creation. David then continues this fatalistic theme through verses 7 to 11 asking God to spare him from his sins, and then David amazes us in the last two verses then he asks God to look away from him, so he may rejoice again before he dies. This strange ending leaves us with the impression that David would find life easier without God; even although he acknowledges that he needs God to sustain him. This presents an interesting tension which we'll deal with in a few minutes.

Let's look at the opening verses of Psalm 39: v1 to 3: *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. But when I was silent and still, not even saying anything good, my anguish increased. My heart grew hot within me, and as I meditated, the fire burned; then I spoke with my tongue.* Watching my ways and keeping my tongue from sinning is wise counsel and I wish I had the sense to keep my mouth shut at times. On the rare occasion when I do engage my brain and stay silent, I hear this small voice in my head telling me that I should have said this or should have said that; does this sound familiar? But David realises that silence is the best option. He will watch his ways and keep his tongue from sin.

As Christians there are three good reasons why we should watch our ways and our tongues. First: We are called to imitate Christ. As Christians we are called to be imitators of Jesus Christ and this places a duty on us to watch how we conduct ourselves. I don't really feel comfortable with talking about Christian living in terms of duty, but if we are Christ's witnesses then we have a duty not to misrepresent Him. Which means we are to guard against the sharp word, regardless of how justified we may think we are. We have to watch our impatience, no bad language or sharp criticisms, no snapping at each other. We are to watch our ways and keep our tongues from sin.

Secondly, we rarely live fulfilled and peaceful lives when we're thinking embittered thoughts. We can't claim to be at peace within ourselves when our minds are focussed on the shortcomings of others. It's said that what comes out of our mouths represents what's in our hearts. If we are given to spreading gossip, telling lies or criticising then it's a fair chance that our hearts are not truly open to God. Jesus said; The tongue defiles the whole body (Matt 15:11). That is so profoundly true for it's difficult to sling mud without getting covered in mud in the process.

How often have we engaged in gossip and felt grubby, even although that was not our intention at all? We were vainly hoping that by making someone else look bad, we would look good, and we were foolish enough to believe that we could build ourselves up by tearing another down. It never works and we never become all we can be in Christ, and so we waste our potential, which is what David was referring to in Psalm 39.

The third reason for us to heed David's teaching, to guard our tongues is because of the damage we can do to others. There's the old rhyme that goes *sticks and stones can break my bones but words can never hurt me*, which is the biggest lie ever told!

Sticks and stones will break our bones, but we rarely suffer mental or emotional damage from a broken leg! Many people can still hear voices from their distant past, telling them that they're not good enough. That they're stupid and will never amount to anything, and these words can be as disabling as any physical condition. How many adults who lack confidence today formed their insecurities over words spoken to them in childhood? The positive word builds people up and gives them encouragement to be all they can be. But criticism and negative comments can hurt people for life. Often people who live with critical parents or teachers simply give up trying to achieve anything. So we are to guard our tongues.

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I have to admit that it's really difficult to go through life without bad mouthing someone or something at some time. We've got a lot of work to do before we can say that we live imitating Christ, but there's good news! We don't have to strive to achieve this standard of living on our own. God knows that in our weak human state we couldn't achieve the high standards Christ set for us. God has given us His Holy Spirit to live within us. As we surrender more of ourselves and allow ourselves to be open to Christ, the more we will be able to demonstrate the characteristics of Christ. What are these characteristics? Galatians 5 teaches us that the *Fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control*. And while some of us are far from this standard, we can trust that God will finish the work He has started in us. If we let ourselves be guided by the Holy Spirit, these fruits will become more evident as we grow.

But to return to David: He lived before Christ and not by the full expression of grace as revealed in Jesus Christ. Yes, God chose and anointed him to be king and to be an ancestor of the line of God's people that included Jesus. David had known God's grace and guidance, just as he'd known God's anger and punishment.

In 2nd Samuel, David commits adultery with Bathsheeba and he plots to have Bathsheeba's husband killed in battle to get him out of the way. Bathsheeba becomes pregnant to David and they have a son. But before the son is born, God tells David that the son will die as a punishment for his sin. David didn't know the God of grace that we experience. God hadn't sent His sacrificial lamb in the person of Jesus to die for David's sin; that was to come. We've been saved from punishment through Christ's sacrifice, but David wasn't to benefit from God's grace as we have. And this may explain the words of David that end this psalm.

V12 to 13: 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. There's some very strange language here! David cries out to God for help which is expected as many of David's psalms and prayers were asking for help and deliverance. But then he says that he dwells with God as an alien, a stranger just as his fathers had. It appears at first reading that David is saying that he and God are strangers, but this isn't what's being said here.

David's saying that God is far from him, but he means that God's favour is far away. David believes he's far from God's grace and that God is punishing him for his sins. It appears that David is depressed and just wants some peace from his suffering. Trying to live with God and with the consequences of his sin have become too much for David. And so he utters the following words in v13: *Look away from me that I may enjoy life again before I depart and am no more.* David is asking God to give him a break. He's asking God to give him peace and allow him to enjoy his life before he dies. That's what David is alluding to when he says *before I depart and am no more.* David acknowledges that all he's been given had come from God, but now he just wants a little time to himself out of God's scrutiny and having to answer for his shortcomings.

Are there times when we feel like this? When the standards set by Christ just seem too high? When we find ourselves asking; how come the world has it so easy when we have it so tough? If you relate to feeling like that then you'll get a sense of what David was saying. But life in Christ doesn't work like that because we can't decide when we want to be Christians with the responsibilities this carries, and when we want to be in the world. Through Christ, we've been saved from the punishment that David was facing. Perhaps he had reason to complain even although the suffering was as a result of his own actions. We don't have that excuse.

This doesn't mean we don't feel like complaining at times, and that brings us back to the beginning of this psalm. We are to be pure in thought for the Bible doesn't say that *it is okay to think it just don't say it*. Verse 1 applies to our thoughts as well as our words: *I will watch my ways and keep my tongue from sin*. Not just our tongues but our minds. When we have negative thoughts about God, we dishonour him and if we think negatively, we'll act negatively which is not as Christ called us to live.

Let us take every thought captive in Christ and when we're frustrated, let's just stop for a moment and pray for the object of our frustration. It's hard to feel negatively for someone when you're praying for them. Make every thought captive and your thoughts will not turn into words. And why are we to live like this? Not for our glory, although people will think better of us for doing so, but for God's glory and for the building of His kingdom. **Amen and let us pray.**

(1837 words)