

Psalm 39: Comfort Even When There Is No Assurance

“Comfort Even When There Is No Assurance” is the title of Marva Dawn’s chapter on **Psalm 39** in *I’m Lonely, Lord—HOW LONG?* To introduce this psalm, she shares a friend’s statement of trust in God: “I just believe that God is still in control and that he will bring good out of all things.” The friend, as it turns out, is a quadriplegic who was paralyzed by an automobile accident. (Dawn, p. 139)

That’s the kind of faith our psalmist (maybe David) is not willing to let go of as he pushes through his anguish and burning silence to speak to his God as YHWH (39:4), his covenant God.

1. What is he asking God to do for him? (39:4-6)

Why do you think he would not want to ask these questions in the presence of “the wicked”? (39:1)

As he faces his own mortality, he humbly says to YHWH, “Let me know *how lacking I am* (my end).” The idea of “lacking” comes from a Hebrew root that means “to cease.” Marva Dawn explains:

This unique word choice stresses how much we need YHWH to show us the inability of our transient existence to perpetuate itself and, consequently, our utter dependence upon him. When we come to such a point of absolute weakness and submission, then we will reorder our attitudes and be able to look up to the Lord for the gifts that he is able to bring out of even our deepest griefs. (Dawn, p. 194)

Maybe our pride gets triggered and we get defensive. We object, “I’ve had enough. Why does God keep allowing me to suffer?” Sometimes we keep sinking to the depths of the deepest despair, like the psalmist in Psalm 88. It’s a good thing for us not to be superficial about this intense pain and violent anguish through which we pass.

But because we fight so hard against being reduced to the point of total weakness, we don’t really believe God for the good purposes he can bring out of the terrible things in our lives. (Dawn, p. 194)

2. What good purposes have you experienced God bringing out of the terrible things in your life?

Humbly recognizing our life as “a breath...a vapor” (**39:5, 6, and 11**) helps us face its transience, our mortality. Facing our limited humanity helps us let go of seeking to control our own lives. Instead, we place our lives in God’s hands for his purposes to bring good out of evil. That’s the psalmist’s emphasis in **39:5**:

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

Of course, we are incredibly valuable to God who made us, but we are human beings totally dependent on God's goodness and grace.

3. In Psalm 39:6, "man" is not the generic word for "person." "Man" describes a particular human being. The psalmist points to a specific man who is "going about." How do you picture his frantic, ambition-filled efforts to gain wealth he can't keep?

4. The lament about the transience of life occurs three times— in verse 5, 6, and 11. What do you notice about the images in those verses?

5. Psalm 39:7 is the center of this psalm. What does "and now" refer to? ("Now that we are clear about.....) How does he address God differently as compared to other parts of this psalm? (YHWH or LORD is the covenant God's personal name. "Lord" is Hebrew "*adonai*," meaning master or sovereign.) Why might he do that?

Write the psalmist's plea to his Lord, his ruler and sovereign, in your own words.

6. Read the repeated refrains of Psalm 42:5 and 42:11 and 43:5. The word "hope" in these verses and 39:7 comes from the verb "to wait." The idea is that this "Lord" is the only one worth waiting for; nothing else gives us hope that does not disappoint. (See Romans 5:1-5, especially 5:5)

7. In 39:8, the "transgressions" the psalmist wants deliverance from are "rebellions." How difficult is it for you to wait (hope in God) for God to bring good out of your hurts and struggles? How do you defiantly seek to work things out for yourself, perhaps with either manipulation or resistance, blocking out God's guidance and transforming love?

8. Psalm 39 concludes with a *plea* for the Lord (his master) to finish his disciplining (39:10-11), and then a *prayer* (39:12-13) for YHWH, his faithfully loving covenant God, to hear him and listen to his distress and not be deaf to his pain. Similar to Psalm 88, Psalm 39 ends without a positive resolution. Instead, the psalmists asks YHWH to look away from him for a moment to give him relief from the truth.

What truths about himself do you think the psalmist longs to find relief from?