A Passing Foreigner?
Psalm 39

Over the summer we're looking at the book of Psalms, and in doing that we deliberately want to look at some of the less well known psalms. Because I think it's fair to say that many of us have a relatively superficial knowledge of the psalms and we can come to the psalms a bit like tourists. Last week Su and I spent a day hiking in Grindlewald. And the first path we took you could barely move for Japanese tourists. They were everywhere! But then we turned off the main path, and we hardly saw a single other person. And with the Psalms you can stick to the well known paths, like Psalm 23 – 'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.' Or Psalm 121, 'I lift up my eyes to the hills, where does my help come from?' And we hear the beauty of those words and we think, 'man, I love the psalms!'

But we never leave the tourist trails, because the truth is that when you get off those trails and into the back paths of the psalms, they can become pretty unsettling, and you don't know what to do with them, as in their rawness the writers pour out their hearts to God. And you can think, 'should something that dark really be in the Bible?' And the answer is, 'yes of course it should', because sometimes life can be like that.

So today we're going to look at a Psalm that has its own dark moments, where the writer is very honest with God, the God he both longs for, and the God he longs would turn away from him.

Read Psalm 39

The Silence of Suffering
Now if you ask Su, she'd tell you that what gets me into trouble, almost invariably, is my mouth. And that's so often the way isn't it? You say something, and you wish you could take your words back. I have a friend who was so prone to messing up with his mouth that he told me that he just opened his mouth so he could change feet. And the Americans among us may remember your past president George W. Bush saying that he had foot and mouth disease, and that his lips were where words went to die.

And because Jesus was right when he said that from the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks, it is so often what we say that gets us in trouble. And David, who wrote this Psalm, knew that very well. He is facing stuff in his life, we don't know what for sure, but he's going through trials and adversity, and he doesn't want to screw up by saying the wrong things: v1, 'I said, "I will guard my ways, that I may not sin with my tongue."'

Now, it's true isn't it that in terms of times in your life when you are really tested, when the real you, the you beneath the veneer, gets to show what it is really like, right at the top are times when either everything seems to be going wrong in your life, or the opposite times when everything is going great.

Proverbs 27:21 says, 'The crucible is for silver, and the furnace is for gold, and a man is tested by his praise.' So you can discover what you are really like when everything is going great and everyone is saying great things about you. Because, do you respond with pride and believe the hype, or do you talk to yourself and to

God and say 'if only they knew what I was really like', and where the glory should really go. So the good times test us.

But times of suffering and trial and adversity are also a crucible, aren't they, when you and others get to discover something more of what you are really like. I mean, just think about it, how do you react when everything is going wrong? When things aren't working out, when your plans are being thwarted, when life is hard and others are letting you down or turning on you? When your job sucks, and you want to strangle your boss, or your husband. What comes out of your mouth in those seasons? Do I respond with self-pity, or anger, or grumbling, because I think I deserve better, because I think God has failed me in some way?

Because what we say then says something about what we really believe in life. It says something about what we think life is about.

And David is stuck in just that situation. He wants to vent, he wants to speak out, he wants to say something. But he also knows that other people are watching him, and in particular unbelievers are watching. Verse 1, 'I will guard my mouth with a muzzle, so long as the wicked are in my presence.'

David is suffering, but he doesn't want to sin by seeming to criticize or blame God. He doesn't want to suggest in some way that God has failed him or let him down, because he doesn't want to give others the grounds to think 'hah, so much for his God.' David wants to handle his suffering right.

So he stays silent. It's the silence of suffering.

But to retreat into a sulky silence, a sort of passive-aggressive silence, would also be wrong wouldn't it? Because ultimately, faith is not silent. It speaks. And not wanting to sin with his mouth, didn't mean that David's inner turmoil just disappeared. Verse 2: 'I was mute and silent; I held my peace to no avail, and my distress grew worse. My heart became hot within me. As I mused, the fire burned; then I spoke with my tongue.'

Sometimes the heart can be like a furnace, or a sauna or a room on a stifling hot day, and you just have to open a window to let the heat out. And David is silent, but that doesn't mean he says nothing. He speaks first to himself, and then to God. And to speak to yourself, and to God, and maybe then to a few you trust can be a huge part of the soul's healing. So David speaks, but he choses carefully before whom he speaks, and he takes his pain to God. As one commentator has written: the faithful know they need to say something and worship is the way to do it.

The Shortness of Life

In his book the Problem of Pain, CS Lewis wrote, "We can ignore… pleasure. But pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

And when David does speak, and speaks to God, what he says is remarkable. He wants to learn the lesson of life's shortness that pain and suffering can teach us. Verse 4, "O Lord, make me know my end and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting I am." And if we will listen to them, suffering and trials and adversity in life can be wake up calls, God's megaphone, to rouse us from the stupor and fog of this life: that our lives are so fleeting, and the longest life so short. So short that David uses one of the smallest Hebrew measures of distance, the handbreadth, 4 fingers, to describe it, v5: 'you have made my days a few handbreadths and my lifetime is as nothing before you. Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath.' You breath out on a cold and frosty day and you see your breath, but then it's gone. And our lives are like that, David says.

And these past few weeks, not because of suffering, but for happier reasons I've had reason to ponder that. Last week, Su and I celebrated our 20th wedding anniversary. Now I know that some of you will think it's impossible, and that I must have been a child groom or something, married aged 5; and some of you older guys are thinking , '20 years… you've hardly started'; but we think, '20 years, where has that gone?' And Naomi, our eldest daughter graduated from Gymnase a couple of weeks back, and yet it seems like only yesterday that she was sat as a little girl on my knee reading books, and now she's a young lady, and worse wherever I turn there's this boy who keeps popping up, this pale-faced youth. And I go to sit on the sofa, and he's there, or I go to the fridge to make a ham sandwich and he's eaten all the ham. And I think, but she was just a baby, my baby, and where is time going? And your life is half-spent before you know it.

Well, if the good things in life can teach you that, how much more does suffering have this power to instruct us, that life doesn't go on and on; that unlike God, our life in this life does have a beginning and an end.

And that is a crucial life lesson to learn, to let the fog lift and see that. Because if we learn that lesson, then it will keep us from wasting our lives. And that's what David prays: v6, '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.' You see in the midst of adversity and suffering, David realises that you can squander your life on stuff that ultimately is of little or no value. You can spend your life stressing about stuff, accumulating stuff, and in the end it's all meaningless, if we allow these peripheral things to take the centre spot. And our short life is wasted. And in the face of death much that passes for success in this life is going to seem pretty empty. And so David doesn't want to go there.

But there's something darker here. You see, when David describes our lives in v5 and 6 as 'nothing… a mere breath… a shadow' he uses a word that recurs again and again the book of Ecclesiastes, and there it's translated as *vanity*. 'Vanity of vanities, says the preacher… All is vanity.' (Ecc 1:2). And so it's not just the shortness of life that troubles David, it is the seeming meaningless of life. That we live this short life, and we suffer in it, and there's no point to it, that ultimately we have no point, because it all ends in the futility and the silence of death; as David ends this psalm: v13, 'before I depart and am no more.'

And so David is plagued by this thought that life and suffering are pointless. And when you're in the midst of it, it can sure seem like that, can't it?

But why should any of this bother us? You see, if atheism is correct, and there is no God, and no point to life, and you are just a thing of chance and your life has no ultimate meaning, why should it bother us? But in our hearts it does bother us. We look at some of the recent events in the world, and there is this deep inner sense of the waste of life, or the injustice of it, of the pain of loss and separation, and we think, it shouldn't be this way. And atheism has no answer to that inner cry, because to atheism it should be that way, life ultimately is meaningless. But the Bible says, you know what, you're right, it should not be this way.

And David knows that all of these questions, all this stuff that is going on in his heart, can only find their answer in God. So it's to God that he turns, v7, 'And now, O Lord, for what do I wait? My hope is in you.' What does David really want, what is he waiting for? A trouble free life? No, he wants God. The problem is that his relationship with God is seriously strained.

The Sting of Sin

Now I reckon it is pretty good pastoral advice to be *extremely* cautious about ever implying that someone is suffering or going through the mill because of their sin. I mean take Job's friends for example. Job is facing horrendous suffering, and his friends all gather round him, and they sit with him in silence and they're just there with him in his pain. And they were doing so well, until they opened their mouths: 'Job, you must have sinned, come on Job you must deserve this in some way, fess up man.' And of course Job hadn't.

But here David realises that what he is going through is as a result of his sin. Verse 8, 'Deliver me from all my transgressions,' v9: 'I do not open my mouth for it is you [God] who have done it.' V10-11, '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.'

And David realises that he has sinned, and that the life-pain he's experiencing is a consequence of that. And he sees God's hand in it all, slowly taking apart everything that David has been tempted to put his trust in, other than God, like a moth eating away at a garment, stripping away the veneer that David had built up around him. And maybe you've experienced that: when it seems as if God is cutting away anything that has become like an idol in your life, and he's stripping it all down, and you wonder what's going to be left.

You see David recognises that his sin has had consequences not just for his physical life, but it's also impacting his relationship with God. And if what we say when we face suffering tells us something about ourselves, how much more is that the case when the pain that we face is a result of our own sin.

And how we respond when we become aware of our sin has this power to affect the future direction of our hearts. If we blame others, or try to justify ourselves, or shrug our sin off, or respond in self-righteous anger at God, then our heart

ends up hardening, and these walls go up between us and others and, crucially, between us and God.

But if you genuinely own your sin, and in confession and repentance soften your heart, then it can be a means to deepening your relationship with God and strengthening the health of your soul. And that's the path David takes.

Now, doctors don't do this anymore, because it's all become politically incorrect, but when I was a junior doctor, there were these abbreviations that medics would use and write in the patients notes, as a kind of code between doctors, most of which were too rude to mention. But in Paediatrics, which was my speciality, you'd be reading the notes and right at the beginning you'd occasionally find the letters GLM, which meant "good looking mum." Or where I worked for a bit, in Norfolk, which is a very rural farming area, you'd see 'NFN' – Normal for Norfolk. But one you've probably all heard, which would be common in the accident and emergency department, was simply NFA: no fixed abode. This guy's got nowhere to live, nowhere to go when we discharge him, nowhere to call home.

And David sees what his sin has done to his relationship with God and he feels like a guy of no-fixed-abode, nowhere to go before God. Verse 12, 'for I am a sojourner with you, a guest like all my fathers.' Now at the kind of distance we are, we don't really get the force of that, but David uses the same words to describe himself as were used for non-Israelites, who were allowed to live in the land, but were not counted among God's people. They had no rights to own property or inherit land. They were foreigners living amongst the people of God. And you know from living here in Switzerland how it can feel sometimes to be a foreigner, cut off and cut out of the system by language and culture. And David is saying that that is what his sin has done to his relationship with God. He has no fixed home, he is rootless, he feels outside God's people, a foreigner to God. And sin does that.

And David knows that if this gulf between him and God is going to be healed then his sin has got to be dealt with and he knows that God is the only one who can do it: v8 again, 'deliver me from my transgressions.' Free me from my sin, deal with my straying from the path. But David has a problem doesn't he? Because it's not just David's sin that's the problem, it's God's righteousness. And he wants God and he knows he needs God, but for God to draw close and deal with his sin means more pain. And that's why David prays this heart-wrenching prayer in the last verse, v13, 'Look away from me [God], that I may smile again.' Have you ever felt like that? That life would just be easier if it wasn't for God dealing with your sin?

So David's trapped. He desperately wants God and the peace and joy that only God can bring, and yet if he is to get some respite and smile again in this life, God is going to have to turn his back on him. To lessen his pain he wants God to look away from him, and leave him alone, whilst all the time, in reality, what he really wants, what we all really want, is for God to smile upon him. For God to say to him and to us, 'it's ok, I know what you are really like, but I love you and accept

you, and you can make your home here'. But how could a righteous God ever do that?

The Smile of God

Mark Dever, a pastor in Washington DC, describes watching a celebrity being interviewed on a chat show. And at one point, as she reviews her life, this film star breaks down in tears and says 'Why do all the people I love have to die?' To which Dever comments, 'why indeed?' You see, we all long for some kind of permanence, don't we. We long for relationships that are not trashed by sin, or ended by death. We long for something good, and lasting. In essence, we are longing for Eden, for paradise regained, for our relationships with God and with others to be restored, to know the smile of God upon us.

But how is David's problem to be solved? How can God turn to us in acceptance and blessing, without turning away from us because of our sin? Well, the good news of the gospel is that David's greatest Son came as the answer. And in Jesus, God became a man, a man subject to the same seeming futility and meaningless of life and suffering and death as David and you and I experience. And whilst David cried out in his pain and suffering, and wept, v12, 'Hear my prayer, O Lord, and give ear to my cry, hold not your peace at my tears.' So Jesus, Son of David and Son of God, wept tears like drops of blood in the garden at the prospect of his own suffering. And whilst David stood silent before the wicked, so Jesus stood silent before his accusers.

And Jesus knew what it was to suffer and to die, but not for his own sins, as David was experiencing, but for David's sins and your sins and my sins. And on the cross he bore the stroke and the hostility of God against our sin that we deserve, but he took it all upon himself. And the wrath of God fell upon Jesus, and God the Father turned his face away, so that His smile might fall upon us, so that we might smile with joy, as David longed to do, knowing that our sins are forgiven.

And so, because of Jesus, God can be, in the words of Paul, both 'just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus' (Rom 3:26). He can both deal with our sin, and declare us not guilty, and it's all because of Jesus. And in Jesus, we are welcomed home, and rather than drift through life like foreigners, never belonging, God adopts us as his children, and says, you belong here with me.

And through his resurrection from the dead, Jesus has demonstrated that death is not the end. It does not end in the silence of the grave, as David feared. Life is not futile, and your suffering is not pointless. Rather, as Paul says, 'for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.'