

# “The Demands of Discipline”

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**Series:** *Psalms*

**Bible Text:** Psalm 39

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Thanks, Phillip. You can be turning to Psalm 39 if you have a Bible, and if you don't, it's printed in your worship guide. You can follow along there. We are looking at some of the Psalms throughout the summer. If you've been here with us over the past several weeks, you've probably noticed a theme that keeps coming up, and it's the theme of God's justice, that God is just against the enemies of his people, against his own enemies, and that's really good news. We've talked a lot about that. Today's Psalm takes a pretty different turn. It's one thing to think about how do we handle people coming against us. It's another thing to think about what happens when it feels like God is coming against us, and not his enemies, but in discipline as his children. So let's read, and remember that this is God's word, and he intends to speak to us here.

Psalm 39 To the choirmaster: to Jeduthun. A Psalm of David.

[1] 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.

[13] Look away from me, that I may smile again, before I depart and am no more!” (ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Would you pray with me?

*We ask now, Father, that as we look at your word, you would give us clarity, that you would give us the illumination of the Holy Spirit, that we can understand what we're reading and not just understand it, but that, Lord, we might be able to see it applied in our lives, that we might see you as you are, and even more, that we might see our Lord Jesus as he is and trust him. We pray in his name, amen.*

If you've ever been to a gym, you have seen, potentially on a t-shirt, potentially on a sign on a wall, a litany of motivational workout quotes. Some are classic, right? There's the classic no pain, no gain, the somewhat more dramatic pain is just weakness leaving the body. There's some that are more ridiculous. I saw one that said, not making this up, sweat is just fat crying, which honestly makes me feel uncomfortable to say on a Sunday morning. Others are more realistic somehow, a judgment-free zone, which I have no idea what that has to do with working out, sounds more like a psychological moral statement to me, but my favorite just says, don't quit. I like that one because it gets at something. Don't quit because we know that you really want to. Why the slogans, why the t-shirts, why the motivational sayings for the workout people? Is it just a way of identifying ourselves and showing, hey, look, we're the people who work out. It probably is that, certainly more than that. You're willingly making yourself miserable. If you're going to keep doing that, you're going to have to have some shred of evidence that this is all worth it in the end. There has to be a payoff. You have to know that you're not just wasting your time. Enduring misery is hard and so you have to have some form of faith that there's a good result at the end or you might just give up, which is to say, if you're going to discipline your body voluntarily, it requires faith to do that. That's a discipline that we impose upon ourselves. We choose that.

What about discipline that we don't choose? Discipline that is imposed upon us. There are no motivational posters for a child who is enduring the discipline of his or her parent. It probably would be nice if there were. You can be creative and make some of those this week if you'd like. There's no motivational poster when you get put on a performance plan at your job. These are disciplines that are being imposed on you and those require faith too. Perhaps the most difficult is the one that we're looking at today, which is what about when God is disciplining us. The scriptures make it clear here and elsewhere, you've already heard it, that the Lord disciplines those he loves and sometimes discipline includes, it's painful. In Psalm 39, what we see is that the discipline of the Lord demands faith.

What does that look like? If you're going to be the kind of person who actually holds up under God's discipline in your life, whatever form it might take, what does it look like to trust him? Three answers to that question, this will make up your outline. Trusting God's discipline means submission, perspective, and hope. Let's talk about each of those.

We're going to have to submit to him.

Let's start with the hardest. The Psalm begins with a conscious effort to be quiet. You can see that in verses one, two, and three there. He's trying to guard his ways, but specifically his tongue. He's going to attempt to muzzle his mouth and be mute and silent and hold his peace. What's clear is that there's something wrong. Something is unpleasant for him. We don't know what it is, but he really, really, really wants to talk about it, but apparently he is in the presence of wicked people. He says that at the end of verse one. This is a Psalm of David. David knew something about what it's like to disgrace the Lord's name among the wicked, particularly with the event with Bathsheba and with her husband Uriah. He knows what it's like to bring shame to the name of the Lord. Here he says, I'm going to muzzle my mouth until I am free from those who would use my words to come against God. It's not easy. Look at verses two and three. His distress grows. His heart becomes hot within him. He's bothered. He's thinking there's a fire burning on his insides. However much he wants to talk to God about it, complain to God about it, lament about it, he has to keep his mouth closed. He has to submit his mouth to the Lord.

And then he goes further. That would be easy. Look at verse nine. He says he's mute. He doesn't open his mouth, and then he says this phrase, *it is you, God, who have done it*. Now, that's a turn. It's one thing to choose to be quiet so that you don't bring shame to the name of the Lord. It's another thing to have to acknowledge that whatever this is that's happening in my life is coming from God's hand. He has done it. Has done what? We get some explanation in 10 and 11. He asked God to remove his stroke. That word stroke is the same word for a wound. He says *I'm spent by the hostility of your hand*. Hear that acknowledgement. Whatever misery and difficulty that is happening to him, it's a wound, a stroke, a hostility from the hand of God himself.

Okay, so does God hate him? Is God trying to crush him and destroy him? Look at verse 11. He reflects on the fact that *when you, God, discipline a man with rebukes for sin, you consume like a moth what is dear to him*.

What is happening? God is disciplining one of his own people. He's rebuking David for sin. He's consuming something that has clearly become an idol in David's life and it's not pleasant and it's painful. It's a wound, a stroke, feels like hostility and God is doing it and that might be the hardest part to grapple with. This trial in David's life is not just allowed by God and it's not just a circumstance and it's not just merely a human consequence for sin. Circumstances and consequences don't happen apart from God's purposes in the lives of his people, but David is grappling with the fact that whatever sin he has committed and whatever misery he's experiencing, it's God who's coming after him and is willing to make him experience pain for a moment so that he might be changed. He's having to submit his body to God, but he's having to submit his thinking and his understanding in his entire life, including his suffering to the God who is calling him to go through it, and this Psalm is him wrestling through it.

If you're ever going to submit to God in that sort of way, if you're ever going to experience difficulty and pain from God and not try to fight him back, it requires this incredibly hard thing called submission.

We could spend a lot of sermons on this topic alone because it might be the one thing that every human being hates the most. No one wants to talk about submission to God, but if we're going to belong to him and call him father, we have to wrestle with this. A good father disciplines his children and we have to accept it. Sometimes it's not pleasant. Let me make a couple of caveats here though since we're talking about discipline.

Not all discipline, in fact, the majority of discipline we could say is not necessarily pain and suffering.

Just so we're clear on that, that most discipline that God brings into your life happens in very ordinary ways. You're sitting in a sermon and God convicts you of something and you talk to him about it and things happen in your life and you kind of move on to the next thing or in worship or at the sacraments or in a small group or in a conversation with a friend. God brings stuff up and chips away at the hard parts of your heart. That's just ordinary normal Christian life, sanctification, and it's sort of the preventative care discipline. That's probably the majority of it. And then there are these moments when you suffer and that's another caveat we need to make.

Not all forms of suffering are definitely God's discipline in your life.

We have to say that. Just because you're suffering doesn't mean that God is trying to discipline you because of your sin. If you've ever read through the book of Job, that's what his friends keep trying to tell him. You've gone through this terrible suffering, clearly you've done something wrong. You have to have. That's how it works, and the whole point of the book is to say, no, that's not actually true. Sometimes we suffer because it's a fallen world and other people do evil to us and a host of other reasons.

My question for us is when we are experiencing trouble and misery and suffering, do we ever ask the Lord,

is there something that you're trying to show me?

Is there something that you're trying to expose?

Is there a sin I need to repent of that I can't see?

Is there something that you're trying to help me understand in this moment?

Is this suffering somehow you disciplining me for my good?

Do we ever ask that question? That's a question that people ask who are trying to be humble of heart and to submit themselves before the Lord. He disciplines us for our godliness and for our good and we need to ask the question. If we would ever endure that, we're going to have to actually trust him and think that he knows what he's doing. We're going to have to believe that he loves us too much to let us stay the same.

One of the reasons this is so difficult in our world is that people will bend over backward and perform exegetical gymnastics to protect God from being implicated in hard things. There's a lot of reasons why we do that, but we have this tendency to want to protect God from being somehow the source of something hard that I'm having to walk through. We want to say things like, no, this is just circumstances. This is just life in a fallen world. This is just a coincidence. God has nothing to do with this as if somehow by getting him off the hook it will help us make sense out of what we're walking through. It actually makes things much more confusing and it flies in the face of the entire Bible.

Why do we struggle to believe that God brings discipline into the lives of his people?

Different ages might answer it differently, but ours would have to say we don't want anyone meddling in our affairs, anyone. A God who is so intimately involved in our lives that he would correct us, that he would bring a difficulty on purpose with an end in mind, it sure seems meddling to us. When you feel that, we might never say that out loud. That's one of those things that just kind of bubbles up from the heart. That is our autonomy and our independence coming out and shaking its fist.

God demands that we submit the entirety of our lives to him and trust that he is good. That's critical to understand. We have to actually trust that he's good. Our slogan might not be pain is weakness leaving the body, but it might be the biblical phrase, humble yourself under God's mighty hand and he will lift you up in due time.

It's critical that we get to the he will lift you up in due time. We have to believe that he's good. It's one thing to say that he's sovereign and that there's nothing that falls outside of his hand, but if we don't believe that he's good, then he's just a powerful ogre of a God. If he's only good, but he's powerless, then he's really nice, but he can't do anything for you. You can't drop one of those. You have to hold on to both. He has to be good.

Do you believe that?

Do you believe that he's so good that he would have purposes for your worst moments?

Do you believe that he's so good that if you knew everything that he knows, you wouldn't even think to ask the question, why are you doing this?

Do you believe that he's so good that he can redeem and use your worst days even for the good of other people?

The word that we would have to use for God is not a meddler, but a good father. That if you're in Christ, your father loves you, and he won't let go of you, and he won't get out of your business. He's that sovereign, but he is good, and we're going to have to submit to him.

It's good that the sermon doesn't end there because that feels very, very difficult. Submission is hard. There's two things that can help us. One of them is perspective, and that's the second thing that we see here in the passage.

If we're going to trust the discipline of the Lord, we have to gain perspective on what he's doing in our lives in the midst of it.

Look back up at verse four. When David's heart is burning and he finally breaks his silence and talks to God, what does he say? What's burning in his heart? He asks the Lord to make him know his end, to make him know the measure of his days, how fleeting his life is, how his life is a vapor. He wrestles with it in verse five. You've made my days a few hand breaths, the width of a hand, so small, before the Lord his lifetime is like nothing. Mankind stands as a mere breath. If you read those verses and you thought, man, that sounds like the book of Ecclesiastes, you were right. It does sound exactly like the book of Ecclesiastes. In fact, three times the primary word in Ecclesiastes is used here. It's the word that is translated vanity or emptiness. Here it's translated, for the most part, breath. My lifetime is as vanity. All mankind stands as a mere vanity, a breath. Same in verse 11.

Is David just depressed? What is this? It's a prayer for perspective. What he's asking the Lord to do is help me understand that I won't actually live forever because I'm really tempted to think that I will. Help me understand that it is possible that I should live an empty, vain, meaningless life because people often live vain, empty, meaningless lives. He's asking for the Lord's perspective. Help me zoom out of this moment and realize the brevity of my life and how not to live an empty one. That gets into meaning. Verse six, he doesn't want to live a shadow of a life. He doesn't want to heap up a lot of things just for somebody else to come and gather.

How does he gain perspective on what matters? It has to do with what he says in verse eight when he asked the Lord, *deliver me from all my transgressions. Don't make me the scorn of fools. Deliver me from sin.* Don't let me continue on in sin and transgression and foolishness such that I live my very few days meaningless and empty and futile. Don't let me waste my existence. It's a way for him to say, Lord, you're disciplining me. You brought something hard in my life. Let it work. Let it bear good fruit. Let it teach me that my life is short and that I could possibly waste it if I continue down the road of transgression. Let your stroke and hostility bear good fruit. That's a good prayer. It's an act of faith to pray it.

That's two good prayers here for the person who's experienced in the discipline of the Lord.

Make me know the measure of my days.

Deliver me from transgression.

Make me know that my life is short and make your discipline work so that I don't end up living a hollow, meaningless life. That's helpful because we live in a day where everybody often is living for the next stimulus. We live among people. We have people in our home. Perhaps at times we

are those who have hollow or half-lives. We can only see what is next in front of us. We're living for the next dopamine hit. We're addicted to technological devices and food and substances and experiences. Our default position when we wake up in the morning is to try to squeeze everything out of every moment and every person and everything I bump into in a consumeristic way, in a parasitic sort of way, completely unable to serve anybody else because we're just consumed with maximizing the next few moments. We need to hear how fleeting we are and that our life is a few hand breaths.

I've had a couple of family funerals over the past month, so a little bit of morbidity from Psalm 39 is just kind of right up my alley at the moment. These family funerals, what has struck me is at both, it's this slamming on the brakes of your brain and your heart when you're sitting there looking at a coffin. Your brakes are slammed on and you have to wrestle with this hard reality, oh no, I'm going to die too.

We spend so much energy trying to never have that thought.

In fact, we could say that most of the people in our culture right now are just trying to numb themselves from ever having to face that, from ever having to ask that question, from ever having to sit and deal with that. When you're forced to see the hard reality of the brevity of life, you'll either become wiser or more foolish. We're either going to double down on the numbing ourselves and trying to just escape it or we might actually become wise and begin to pray something like this, Lord, let me know the fleeting nature of my life. Let it be wisdom for us.

What might it mean for us to pray:

Lord, help me see my sin, deliver me.

Help me see my idols, take them from my hands.

Don't let me give worship to things that are vain and empty.

Help me see where I'm becoming the scorn of fools

And help me see the sin that I can't see.

It's really hard to ask God to deliver you when you can't see anything wrong. Praying for God's perspective is to echo Psalm 139 where we might say, *search me and know my heart. Try me and know my thoughts. See if there's any grievous way in me and lead me in the way everlasting.*

Which is to say, don't let me waste my short life.

Don't let me be consumed by sin and unrighteousness.

Deliver me, forgive me, lead me toward wholeness and substance throughout my few days on earth.

Do you ever ask for perspective?

Do you ever ask God to help you understand the brevity of your life and to make his discipline effective so that you don't end up with a hollow existence?

We have the freedom and the privilege to ask the Lord that and to trust that as he disciplines us. That's one of the things he's trying to give us, is his perspective. We need to submit to him. We have to have his perspective. Those are good things, but what we really have to have more than that is hope. Let's talk about that last thing here.

Trusting God's discipline means hope.

Verse seven, *and now, oh Lord, for what do I wait? My hope is in you.* Understand what he's saying.

Even when it's the Lord who has sent the stroke into his life, my hope is in you.

When he realizes that it's God's hand who has brought hostility against him, my hope is in you.

When the Lord is in charge of discipline and rebuke, my hope is in you.

We need to understand that biblical hope is not just our sense of hope, which is sort of a vague pie in the sky optimism or wishful feelings. That's kind of how we use that word. I hope I get a nap today. This is more, I hope the sun comes up tomorrow. Guess what? Barring physical universe catastrophe, the sun will come up tomorrow. That's not a wishful dream. It's voicing a certain reality. That's biblical hope. It's looking forward with certainty. He's not hoping in better circumstances. He's not even just hoping that future things will be less painful, though I'm sure he wants that. He says my hope is in the person of God himself.

How can we ever get there?

How can we have hope in the person of the God who made us and redeems us?

Look at verse 12. He asked the Lord to hear his prayer and not hold his peace at his tears. And then he says this enigmatic phrase, *I am a sojourner with you, a guest like all my fathers.* He says the same thing at the end of his life. There's this moment right before Solomon is anointed king where David prays a prayer and he says these words. *We are strangers before you and sojourners as all our fathers were.* Our days on the earth are like a shadow and there is no abiding. And that sure sounds a lot like this Psalm.

What does that mean? God's people are constantly in the Old Testament told to show mercy to the sojourner and the stranger and to be gracious to them and to provide for them and to even include them in certain aspects of their life. Why? Because God's people were strangers and sojourners in the land of Egypt and they were strangers and sojourners in the wilderness. And God himself in Leviticus says of his people, he says, you are strangers and sojourners with me. And we read it earlier from the book of Hebrews that it's part of our identity as the people of God, even when we're in the land, even when you have a house and stability and a good income to be able to say, I am still a sojourner and a stranger with God himself. Why do we say that? Because we're not home yet. This isn't it. We're not there. We're not in the land. The author of Hebrews says that this is a theme throughout the whole Bible. The patriarchs acknowledged they were strangers and exiles on the earth. They desired a better country, a heavenly one. They were looking for a city that actually has foundations, implied none of these cities have foundations. They're all subject to decay and being completely blown apart. But there is a city that has foundations whose designer and builder is God.

What city are you looking for?

Peter says that Christians are sojourners and exiles on the earth. That that is our reality. God is our hope and the guarantor of our future because even at our best when we have it all, we're still strangers and exiles here.

Here's what that does for us. It frees you. It frees you from having to gather and hoard and protect and squeeze life out of everything else around you. If God is your hope, your future is secure, there's a city with actual foundations to which you go for all eternity. You now realize I have everything and I can give up everything that I have for the sake of the kingdom. And the great irony in the Christian life is when we die like that, that's when we are most alive. That's the pattern of the kingdom. We have hope in God because we are strangers and exiles in the land who have a guaranteed home. We have him. And so we really don't have to have anything else.

The reason that we know that we have him would come many years after this psalm is written. It would come from a descendant of David himself who would live out many of the things that David says here. The Lord Jesus would be mute and silent, like a sheep before its shearers, silent speaking not a word.

He would come and open not his mouth.

He could have called down angels to deliver him, but he stayed silent.

He would not be disciplined for sin because he didn't have any.

He would not need to be delivered from his transgressions because he never transgressed.

He would not have a moment in his life that was hollow or empty existentially speaking, and he would experience a lot more than a stroke, a wound, and hostility from the Father's hand.

He would experience justice, wrath, and death on the cross so that people like us can actually be delivered from our transgressions, all their penalty and power.

He would come to die and rise so that we can have actual hope in God himself and believe that he's actually for us.

He's not against us. Whatever suffering you experience is not the punitive judgment of God Almighty in your life. It's not if you're in Christ, because he took that. What you're experiencing is fatherly discipline and it changes the nature of our suffering. He would come and do everything necessary to call us out of the world and call us into the life of a sojourner and a stranger who's looking for a city with foundations. We have him.

If you're in Jesus Christ, by faith you have him.

You have real hope even when you don't feel like it. You have real hope.

You have real hope even when you're suffering and it feels like everything is going wrong.

You have actual the sun will rise tomorrow hope and even more sure than that.

When everything seems like it's spinning out of control, your past has been settled, your future is secure and you can endure the present.

Will you trust him?

Let me say this. If you're here and you're not yet in Christ Jesus, you're not yet a Christian, you're not sure that you really trust in the Lord Jesus. I don't want to say this too strongly, but I want to ask, why do you have hope in anything? What is the basis for your hope? Why are you optimistic about the future? How can you be sure that this suffering is somehow going to be for your good? The scriptures don't give you any sort of reason for that sort of hope. They rather say that your transgressions haven't been dealt with. There's a past that has to be reckoned with, and there's a just God and there's a future that doesn't look great apart from faith in Jesus, but you don't have to stay in that hopeless place. You can trust the Lord Jesus, ask him to deliver you from your transgressions and believe that he'll do it and then you'll be called into this strange and yet glorious life of being a sojourner and a guest, but you'll have God himself and a city that has foundations, and suddenly you'll find yourself able to wake up and look and notice, oh, other people, and you might move toward them and serve them. You might even find ways to give your life away for the good of others, and you might even find yourself willing to die to yourself and to some of your desires because you have everything that you need in Christ.

For the moment, all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who've been trained by it, and the author of Hebrews goes on to say, okay, so lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees and make straight paths

for your feet. The discipline of the Lord is not him trying to crush you. The discipline of the Lord is proof that he loves you and now you have what you need to actually get up and get back into it and walk in faithfulness this week. You can strengthen your weak knees and lift your drooping hands. He's doing something good for you, but you're going to have to trust him.

You're going to have to submit to him fully, your tongue and the whole of your life, and believe that he's sovereign and good.

You're going to have to keep trying to gain his perspective. Look to the word, be in community with Christian friends who can help you understand the brevity of your life and how not to live a meaningless life.

And you're going to have to keep living in hope, and thankfully you have every reason for it. You belong to Jesus who died, who was raised, and who will return and bring you into a heavens and earth with no endings, no fleeting days, no transgressions, no stroke, no hostility, but rather discipline will have had its final and full expression and we will be with him in the city with foundations. Let's pray that we will wait and trust him. Pray with me.

*Lord you know we don't like discipline. We don't like submission. We don't like trying to gain perspective. We hope in all the wrong things, but we ask you Father to help us trust in your goodness. Help us look to the Lord Jesus and to his death as the proof for us that your discipline of our lives is not judgment, that you're not angry with us in that sense. Help us to hold up and to entrust our lives fully to you and to believe that you're good and to see where you're leading us. Give us what we need to endure. I pray for anyone today who honestly has no hope. Would you let the good news be good in their ears, in their heart? Let them trust the Lord Jesus and let them hope in you. We ask in your name. Amen*