

Psalm 39:1-13
A Meditation and Prayer for the New Year
by Grover Gunn
pastor, Grace Presbyterian Church
Jackson, TN

I know many of you are asking the question, "Whatever happened to the year 2007? It seems like it is just starting, and now it is already over." The year has indeed gone quickly, and now another year has begun.

Before we know it, the year 2010 will be coming to a close, and we will be saying, "Whatever happened to the first decade of the 21st century?" We will be saying, "I can remember when years beginning with the digit two seemed to be in the distant future, and now we are already into the second decade of years beginning with the digit two."

We will all one day also be asking whatever happened to our allotted time upon this earth, whatever happened to our four score and ten. Truly our time upon this earth is as a vapor, as a morning mist which appears with the dawn and which the rising sun then quickly burns away.

As one year passes away and as another year is born, we should try to pause for a moment in the midst of life's busy rush. We should try to stop and reflect. We should reflect upon the significance of this short life. This life, short though it may be, is a time of probation with eternal consequences. This life, short though it may be, is a prelude to eternity, and we will in this life set patterns and establish destinies which will continue forever. Since this short life has such enduring and significant consequences, we should reflect

upon our stewardship of this past year. We should consider how we spent our time these past twelve months because our time is our life and as such it is a most precious commodity. How did we spend it? We should resolve, with Christ's help, to do better in this new year. We should resolve to be better stewards of the time which remains for us, however short or long that time may be.

I believe the 39th Psalm is a good passage for us to consider as we face the new year. This psalm has a helpful realism in that it refers to difficulties and afflictions, experiences which do seem to be a part of every year that we live on this planet. This psalm also refers to a broken vow. If there is anything which people associate with the new year, it is the resolutions which people make at the beginning of the new year and then so quickly break and abandon. This psalm points to the futility of our keeping any resolution as long as we try to do so in our own power apart from God's help. Finally this psalm points to the hope that we have for living a righteous life with eternal significance if we look to God in faith for forgiveness, deliverance and enablement through Christ.

We will look at this psalm today under three headings: the well intended vow, the unintended vice, and the divinely enabled virtue. In short, the vow, the vice and the virtue.

Before we start, however, with our outline, let's first consider the context of this psalm of David. I believe we can get the context from the prayer which is found in verse ten of this psalm:

10 Remove Your plague from me; I am consumed by the blow of Your hand.

The psalmist David was experiencing some sort of serious set-back in life, some sort of affliction, some sort of oppression, some sort of opposition, some sort of disappointment and difficulty. David also knew that the source of this difficulty was the chastening hand of the Lord. David recognized the root involvement of His heavenly Father who chastens those whom He loves.

Whenever we experience such sorrows and difficulties, we can know that they are to some degree simply a part of the common curse upon humanity which resulted from our father Adam's fall into sin. Anyone can come down with a dreadful disease. Anyone can be injured in an accident. Anyone can find themselves in the path of a tornado or in the path of a lightening bolt. Such afflictions afflict people with an apparent randomness which often does not appear to take into account people's righteousness or wickedness. Yet sometimes an affliction is the direct result of some sinful behavior. Sometimes an affliction is clearly the reaping of what we ourselves have previously sown. Whenever we experience any affliction, we should be open to the possibility that our affliction is to some degree the chastening hand of the Lord upon us. Whenever we experience any affliction, we should take advantage of the occasion as an opportunity for some self-examination. We should look at the log in our own eye. Jesus taught that when we hear of any tragedy upon anyone, we should use such times to examine ourselves and to repent of our own sins:

Luke 13:1-5

- 1 There were present at that season some who told Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.
- 2 And Jesus answered and said to them, "Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things?"

- 3 "I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish.
- 4 "Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem?
- 5 "I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish."

Whenever we hear of a tragedy, it is an opportunity to examine ourselves and to consider our own worthiness for judgment. We should always be open to such a time of self-examination and repentance because sin does cling to all that we do and we can never say that we don't deserve chastening from God. Even when our conduct is outwardly blameless and even when our conduct is exemplary in the eyes of others, sin still clings to our inward thoughts and motives and intentions. Even when we are on our best behavior, we should not complain about God's chastening hand being upon us.

God's chastening hand was upon King David. We are not told the specifics. The psalms often speak of afflictions in vague and general terms so that we may all the more easily see the relevance of the psalms to our own very specific afflictions in life. We will now look at David's response to his affliction, and we will seek to learn, with God's help, from his experience.

We will begin by looking at the well intended vow. As David endured his affliction, he also wrestled with inner temptations. Perhaps he was tempted to complain about the problems which beset him while the wicked seemed to prosper in this life. Perhaps he was tempted to question openly the justice of his situation. Perhaps he was tempted to express self-pity. He was obviously

wrestling with some sort of inner temptation in the midst of his outward trials, and this motivated him to take a vow of silence. David's intentions were good. He noted that he was living in the presence of the wicked. He was living in a goldfish bowl, as the saying goes, and he didn't want to say anything which might dishonor God. He didn't want to say anything which might compromise the testimony of the righteous. He didn't want to say anything which might encourage the wicked in their rebellion against God. So he resolved to say absolutely nothing during his time of trial.

As is the case with most vows and resolutions, David was successful for a time. He did not complain. He did not openly question God's goodness or God's justice or God's wisdom. Yet there was a fly in the ointment. Look at verse two:

2 I was mute with silence, I held my peace even from good; and my sorrow was stirred up.

Yes, David refrained from openly complaining against God, but he also refrained from openly acknowledging the many blessings that God showered upon him even in the midst of his difficulties. David committed the sin which Paul points out in Romans 1:21 as a sin that was so characteristic of the pagan world:

21 ... although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful ...

Even in our darkest times, we have an obligation to give thanks to God for all His goodness to us. Even in our darkest times, we have an obligation to rejoice in the Lord. Even in our darkest times, we have an obligation to believe that God is working all things for His own glory and for the good of those who love Him.

David failed to do this. In his silence, he failed to focus on God and God's revelation in His Word. David instead turned inward and became introspective. He engaged in self-pity, and the sorrow of his heart was soon stirred like the embers of a dying fire. Before long, his heart was hot with anger and burning with bitterness.

I believe we can all identify with David, some of us more than others because we are all different. What tempts you may not tempt me, and what tempts me may not tempt you. Yet I believe we all know to some degree what it is to focus inordinately on some perceived injustice or disappointment in life until we blow it all out of proportion. I believe we all know what it is to have an inner fire which at first consumes all our energy and all our hope. Our well intended silence becomes a bitter withdrawal into a shell, and we don't want to talk to anyone. Then the inner fire reaches a new level of intensity and bursts forth in bitter complaint against our lot in life, a complaint ultimately addressed to God Himself.

We have looked at the well intended vow, and our second point, which we have really already gotten into, is the unintended vice. To use the language of the latter part of Romans chapter seven, our first point is the good which I would do, and our second point is the sin which I instead practice.

David had taken a vow of silence, but his inward anger became so great that he burst out in a cry of angry despair. David broke his vow of silence with the sinful noise of complaint. We find that noisy cry in verses four through six of our text.

Now if we read these verses in isolation from their context, we might not recognize them immediately as an angry cry of despair.

These words can have almost opposite meanings depending on the tone in which they are uttered. Said in one tone, these words could express a righteous resignation to the transience of this life and an acceptance of the importance of the life to come. Said in another tone, these words could express an angry despondency regarding the difficulties of this life. We don't have recorded for us the tone of voice in which these words were said, but we do have the context in which they were said. The context points to a sinful outburst which breaks a well intended vow of silence.

Look at verse four:

4 "LORD, make me to know my end, and what is the measure of my days, that I may know how frail I am.

These words can be interpreted as the despondent expression of a death wish. These words can be a sinful challenge for God to cause one to experience his end, a challenge for God to take his life, a despondent plea for God to let him die. These words can mean this, and that is the interpretation which the context points to. In this sinful outburst, the psalmist went on to complain about the shortness of life, about the precariousness of life, about the seeming futility of life and about the unpredictability of life. The psalmist voiced these complaints about life as justifications for his death wish.

The devil does indeed tempt us with discontentment. Even in the midst of paradise, the devil was able to tempt Adam and Eve with discontentment over their creatureliness. The devil told our first parents that they deserved to be like God, and our first parents believed this lie. Sin does cause people to be angry over their very creatureliness. Now what is creatureliness? It is a limited and

dependent state of being. The creature looks to his Creator for his very existence. The creature looks to his Creator for his moment by moment sustenance, for the next breath, for the next heartbeat. The creature looks to his Creator for meaning, for purpose, for guidance, for truth, for morality. In short, the creature looks to his Creator to cloth his naked existence with a defining essence.

The devil first tempts us to be discontent with our limited creatureliness. Then he tempts us to be angry at God for the curse that is now upon humanity as if this were God's fault. The fruits of the curse in this life are bitter indeed. They are sickness and pain and scarcity and death. The blame for these rightfully belongs to humanity because of the human race's rebellion against God, but the devil tempts us to put the blame upon God instead.

When we fall to the devil's temptation and we are discontent with our creatureliness and we are angry at life's sorrows due to the sin of our race, then one possible response is the proud despondency of the death wish. We are simply too good for this sorrowful existence. We deserve better, and we ask for death as our way out.

We have looked at the well intended vow and the unintended vice. Our third point is the divinely enabled virtue. This is the same flow of thought which we find in the latter part of Romans chapter seven when we read about the good we would do and the evil which we instead practice. Our third point, the divinely enabled virtue, is also well summarized by some of the closing words of Romans chapter seven:

- 24 O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this
body of death?
25 I thank God-- through Jesus Christ our Lord! ...

Our intentions may be good, but our practice is evil. The answer is the salvation that is ours through Jesus Christ our Lord.

In the last part of our psalm, the psalmist regained his focus on God with the eyes of faith. The psalmist rejected the devil's distorting interpretation of life and submitted again to reality. His heart was drained of bitterness and was filled instead with gratitude. We see the transition in verse 7:

7 "And now, Lord, what do I wait for? My hope is in You."

Here the psalmist recognized the insanity of sin. He recognized the foolishness of cutting himself off from God in proud anger. The proper response of the creature is to praise God for his creation. The proper response of the sinner is to look to God for redemption. The psalmist recognized the folly of rebellion against God because God is His only hope. Apart from God, he has no existence. Apart from God, he has no moment by moment sustenance. Apart from God, he has no forgiveness for his sins. Apart from God, he has no deliverance from the dominating power of sin and no deliverance from the painful consequences of sin.

In this last section, the psalmist again referred to this life as a vapor, but this time his comment was not in a context of complaint. This time his comment was in a context of recognition of his dependence upon God. Now he prayed that since life is as a vapor, since life is so short, may God remove his affliction and give him strength to live his remaining days for God. Now that the psalmist has repented of his sin and now that the psalmist has already benefited spiritually from God's chastening hand, the psalmist humbly prayed for God's undeserved blessings upon him.

The psalmist in his repentance referred to himself in this life as a sojourner, a name for a traveler who is temporarily living in a strange country. This is another way of expressing the thought with which I began this sermon. This life is important because it is a prelude to eternity. We are strangers here; our permanent home is to come. As the people of God, our sorrows here are temporary. As the people of God, our joys here are the foretaste of greater joys to come. Our goal in our short sojourn should be to live for God's glory and kingdom.

Beloved, as you enter this new year, remember the importance of keeping your focus upon Christ. As you enter this new year, remember the importance of maintaining a daily fellowship with Christ. As you enter this new year, remember that your faith in Christ is your spiritual lifeline. Apart from Him you can do nothing. You may with good intentions resolve to do better this year, but you won't be able to keep your resolutions in your own power. You need Jesus Christ.

Look to Jesus for forgiveness. Look to Jesus for deliverance. Look to Jesus for enablement. We intend to do good. We practice evil instead. O wretched people that we are! Who will deliver us from these bodies of death? We thank God -- through Jesus Christ our Lord.

One key to keeping your faith strong in 2008 is to assemble regularly with the people of God on the Lord's Day to worship Jesus in spirit and in truth. We are now about to partake of the Lord's Supper. Pray that God will use the Lord's Supper to strengthen and confirm your faith. And as you partake today, I challenge you to recommit yourself to Christ in 2008. Commit

yourself to worshipping Christ regularly with the people of God in 2008. Commit yourself to living for Christ in 2008. Commit yourself to walking with Christ in paths of righteousness in 2008.

This life is so very short. Each day is precious. Committing yourself to Christ is the only way to live this short life to your eternal advantage.