

LESSON 11

PSALMS 39—42

PSALM 39: GOD AND THE MEANING OF LIFE

Centering on the perplexities of life, this individual lament is possibly a sequel to the previous psalm. The riddles of life are not confronted by this writer with a philosophical discussion, but are dealt with in connection with the writer's personal experience with a life-threatening illness or chastisement for his sin. We do not know the exact time or occasion of the writing.

Three issues trouble the writer: the fleeting nature of life, the prosperity of the wicked, and the seeming purposelessness of human life. Perhaps he was languishing in poor health and believed that he was nearing the end of his earthly journey. He faced these tough mental struggles with his faith in God. After having experienced the discipline of God, he came to see the true meaning of life.

1. What has the writer done about talking to God?
2. What does the writer want to know about life?
3. When should we be silent?
4. How does God consume as a moth?
5. Why does the writer want God to turn His gaze away from him?

PSALM 40: THE EVER-PRESENT GOD

The reader of this psalm is presented with two pictures of God—which together compile a third description of Him. The first portrait says that He is the God who has acted in the past. The second one shows Him as the God who helps with any existing trial. United, they depict a God who is ever-present to defend, deliver, and sustain His people.

Uniquely, verses 13 through 17 of this psalm in a somewhat modified form comprise Psalm 70, a fact that raises several compositional questions. Both Psalms 40 and 70 are ascribed to David by their titles and are dedicated to the chief musician. Did the writer later take part of this psalm and convert it into Psalm 70? Did a later inspired writer lift from Psalm 40 wording that was especially applicable to his own situation and form Psalm 70? Did David incorporate in Psalm 40 a portion of a psalm that he had written earlier? The best guess seems to be that later in the life of the psalm, David or another writer appropriated a paragraph from the psalm and made that paragraph into Psalm 70 for a special purpose.

Another uniqueness of Psalm 40 is that verses 6 through 8 are applied, at least in part, to Jesus in Hebrews 10:5–9. In that sense, this psalm may be identified as a messianic psalm.

Because its emphasis and tone vary, the psalm can also be classified either as a thanksgiving psalm or a lament psalm. Generally, it is considered a lament psalm because of the strong call for divine assistance in its last few verses.

The psalm can be divided into two sections: a part that considers the past (vv. 1–10) and another part that looks at the present (vv. 11–17). The emphasis of the first part is praise; the second stresses petition.

6. What are the three pictures of God?
7. Has God heard his prayer?
8. What does the Lord desire from us?
9. How is verse 8 used in connection with Jesus?

PSALM 41: HOPE IN THE MIDST OF SUFFERING

Even though this psalm has a strong lament character, it rises to a high note of gratitude for the gifts that have been bestowed and could well be classified as a thanksgiving song. The writer is either presently suffering from a life-threatening sickness or is looking back on a time when he was suffering.

The penman writes about a circumstance in which he faced a double hardship: a time when he was wrestling with an illness and when he was being afflicted by enemies and a turncoat friend, both of whom were poised and ready to rejoice over his death. However, in spite of his troubles, he looks to God with thanksgiving and a confident faith.

The heart of the psalm is the section that is made up of verses 4 through 10. These verses comprise a prayer/lament, written in the form of an inclusio appeal—that is, a petition that is hedged in by the plea “be gracious to me.”

Through the words of this psalm we see the royal road to triumph over our problems. We are shown that the godly person is blessed even though he or she may be in pain, almost friendless, and hounded by insensitive and senseless foes.

10. What will God do for those who remember the poor?

11. How has this man been treated by others?

12. How does one find true happiness?

13. How does this psalm close?

BOOK II: PSALMS 42—72

Psalm 42 begins the second book of Psalms, a collection containing thirty-one psalms (42—72).

Two general characteristics of these psalms are immediately apparent. In the first book (1—41), David is the only author named in the superscriptions; in this book, only eighteen psalms out of the thirty-one are superscriptionally attributed to him. In addition, this group of psalms has been referred to as the “Elohistic Psalms” because the name Elohim is the name most often used for God in them. Elohim (אֱלֹהִים) is used 198 times, while Yahweh (יהוה) is used 32 times.

14. What new names are found in the superscriptions?

15. Why is this group of the psalms called the “Exodus Book”?

PSALM 42: THIRSTING FOR GOD

This psalm and the next one are closely connected. At some time, the two probably comprised one song. They emphasize the same theme, have the same spirit, use similar language, and share the same refrain: “Why are you in despair, O my soul?” (42:5a, 11a; 43:5a). Furthermore, every psalm in Book II has a title except Psalm 43. Perhaps it does not have a title because Psalm 42 and 43 were one psalm when the titles were assigned.

Even though considerable evidence exists that these two were once a single psalm, the majority of the Hebrew manuscripts and the ancient versions of the Scriptures present them as two psalms. For this reason, let us study them as separate but companion psalms.

In these eleven verses, the writer expressed his love for the temple and the worship of God. For some reason he was isolated from the temple and was unable to participate in its services, feasts, and festivals. In addition, he was surrounded by people who taunted him regarding God. These circumstances combined to make him lonely for the Lord. He yearned for an opportunity to worship Him in His magnificent temple.

16. Describe the writer's longing to worship God.
17. What does he say to his soul?
18. What does he conclude regarding the place of worship?
19. What is the message for us in this psalm?
20. Describe how we should hope in God.