

Confessing to be a Stranger with God

By Rev. Erik Guichelaar

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Grace Protestant Reformed Church

O-11225 8th Ave NW
Grand Rapids, MI 49534

Website: www.graceprc.org
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/graceprc

And for the scripture reading, we turn to that Psalm, Psalm 39. Psalm 39.

1 To the chief Musician, even to Jeduthun, A Psalm of David. I said, I will take heed to my ways, that I sin not with my tongue: I will keep my mouth with a bridle [with a muzzle], while the wicked is before me. 2 I was dumb with silence, I held my peace, even from good; and my sorrow was stirred. 3 My heart was hot within me, while I was musing the fire burned: then spake I with my tongue, 4 LORD, make me to know mine end, and the measure of my days, what it is; that I may know how frail I am. 5 Behold, thou hast made my days as an handbreadth; and mine age is as nothing before thee: verily every man at his best state is altogether vanity. Selah. 6 Surely every man walketh in a vain shew: surely they are disquieted in vain: he heapeth up riches, and knoweth not who shall gather them. 7 And now, Lord, what wait I for? my hope is in thee. 8 Deliver me from all my transgressions: make me not the reproach of the foolish. 9 I was dumb, I opened not my mouth; because thou didst it. 10 Remove thy stroke away from me: I am consumed by the blow of thine hand. 11 When thou with rebukes dost correct man for iniquity, thou makest his beauty to consume away like a moth: surely every man is vanity. Selah. 12 Hear my prayer, O LORD, and give ear unto my cry; hold not thy peace at my tears: for I am a stranger with thee, and a sojourner, as all my fathers were. 13 O spare me, that I may recover strength, before I go hence, and be no more.

So far we read God's holy and infallible word.

The text is the second half of verse 12,

12 ...for I am a stranger with thee, and a sojourner, as all my fathers were.

Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, Psalm 39 is a Psalm that expresses some of the deepest and hardest struggles that the child of God will face. Psalm 39 is a Psalm in which the child of God is being lovingly, but severely, chastened by the Lord and he is struggling to deal with it appropriately. In this Psalm, the child of God is struggling with

impatience. He's bearing a burden. He's feeling greatly discouraged and he is going through a struggle in which he needs to remember what his perspective in life needs to be. In this Psalm, we are given a glimpse into how the child of God is brought back into having that proper perspective.

If I may put it this way, this Psalm is a very mature Psalm because the fact is, if your life, if your spiritual life is a shallow and superficial life, then this Psalm isn't going to make much sense to you. With all that being the case, I don't think the Psalm would be normally used for a confession of faith because when an individual makes confession of faith, it's a very joyful occasion for the congregation and for the family and the individual and this Psalm doesn't express anything like that. This Psalm focuses on the chastening hand of God. Nevertheless, we do look at this Psalm this morning on the occasion of confession of faith because tucked in at the very end of the Psalm is found a beautiful confession of faith, a confession of faith that gives the Psalmist encouragement and relief from his burden, a confession of faith that gives the Psalmist hope, hope that the Lord will hear his cry for help. "Hear my prayer, O LORD, and give ear unto my cry; hold not thy peace at my tears." Why? Why do I have hope that God will answer, that God will hear and answer my prayer? "Because I am a stranger with thee and a sojourner as all my fathers were." And just as that confession of faith is what served as the Psalmist's help in his hard times, that confession of faith is also what will serve as our help in our difficult times too and that confession of faith is essentially the confession that Jordan has made this morning. Jordan, you said it this morning, you are a stranger with God. Jordan is a stranger with God and a sojourner as all his spiritual fathers were.

Well, this confession of faith is profitable for all of us to meditate on it, but I think it's also, perhaps especially profitable for our young people and young adults. For those who have big things in the future, for those who have a transition that they are about to go through, those who are on the move, and those who have plans for the future, it's good to be reminded of who we are as pilgrims and strangers on the earth. Not only are we so often physical pilgrims and strangers, but we are also especially, fundamentally, spiritual pilgrims and strangers on the earth. We are strangers and pilgrims on the earth with God, having God as our constant companion. These are the things we would like to concentrate on for the short time this morning. We take as our theme "Confessing to be a Stranger with God." We look at two things: first, the meaning, and then the comfort.

"I am a stranger with thee and a sojourner as all my fathers were." Well, in the text, the words "stranger" and "sojourner" stand for the same thing. This is Hebrew parallelism, but there is a slight difference of emphasis in each word. The word "stranger," that first word, refers to someone who's living in a foreign country. He's not a native or a citizen of that country. He has made that foreign country his dwelling place, but it's a land where he doesn't fully belong. Think, for example, of an American living in the Philippines or in Japan. He's an American, but living in a place where he doesn't fully belong. He's a stranger. The word "sojourner," the second word in the text, builds on that idea of a stranger, but then emphasizes, in addition, the idea of a person who's not even fixed in one single location. So the sojourner is even more than a stranger because he's not only in a foreign land, but he doesn't even have a settled place to live in that foreign land. He's a stranger without a fixed place to live. He's merely passing through this foreign land.

David says in the Psalm that he is a stranger and a sojourner. He is one who is merely passing through.

Well, let's explain that more deeply. What is the idea? What is a stranger and sojourner? I have three things to point out here. First, as I already said a little bit, a stranger and a sojourner is one who is dwelling in a foreign land. He himself is in a land where he doesn't fully belong. It's not the land where he comes from. It's not the land to which he is going. He really doesn't belong in that land at all. Now congregation, it's striking that David would say this. After all, where was David when he wrote this Psalm? Well, we can't be sure, but we have no reason to believe that David was outside the land of Judah at this time. David was in the land of Judah among God's people, and yet he felt that as he dwelt here on the earth, he was a stranger and sojourner.

Well, congregation, that's how it is with us too, isn't it? We live as members of the church. We enjoy life in the midst of the congregation, whether it's here, whether it's somewhere else. We enjoy the fellowship of the saints, and yet as we live on this earth, this continues to be our experience, "I am a stranger and a sojourner with God." Why is that the case? Well, that's our experience, that's the case because, first of all, the entire church collectively is a stranger and sojourner on the earth. We are all strangers with God in relation to where we are in this foreign land here below on the earth. That's also the case, secondly, because as the children of God, we are those who have been born from above. We have been regenerated. Our citizenship is in heaven. There's a life within us that is not of this world. We are new creations. That's especially what Jordan was confessing this morning. Jordan is a regenerated child of God. God has worked a true and living faith in Jordan, and that makes Jordan a stranger here on the earth because as to what lives in Jordan's heart, Jordan has not been born of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. He is born from above. That's where his citizenship lies. That's his birthplace, and that's true for the church of Jesus Christ as a whole.

And so this is our experience, both individually and collectively, we are those day by day who are dwelling in a foreign land. In a certain sense, we can even go further and we can say we are strangers who dwell in a foreign land, not just in relation to the wicked world around us, but even in relation to ourselves, that is, in relation to our old man of sin. In a very real and profound way, I am a stranger to myself. And we feel that tension in our own lives day by day. My new man is a stranger to my old man. And that experience, perhaps especially, can impress upon us this fact that we are pilgrims and strangers. We groan within ourselves looking to be home, hating the motions of sin in our members. In David's own battle against his own sin, in an attempt to control his own impatience and act godly in the midst of hardship, this was David's own self-alienating experience. He says, "I am in conflict with myself. I am a stranger when it comes to myself and my sinful nature. I hate it, and I wish I could be rid of it and be fully home. So Lord, as I continue on my sojourn, and as I grow weary of living this way, Lord, hear my prayer and help." We'll look at that near the end of the sermon, the broad context of the whole Psalm.

So first, a stranger is one who dwells in a foreign land. And second, a stranger and a sojourner is one who in that foreign land usually has limited rights and privileges, right? For example, in the U.S., a foreigner is one who can't vote for president. A foreigner is usually one who can't stand for office. A stranger is one who is lawfully discriminated against in that country he is passing through. But sometimes a stranger is also unlawfully discriminated against. A person can be treated unfairly or taken advantage of simply because he is a foreigner, simply because he's all alone or he's different and doesn't have anyone he knows. One of the things that God was emphatic about with his people in the Old Testament was this, "You will take care of the stranger in your midst because remember, you also were one time strangers in the land of Egypt, and the experience you had back then, you remember that?" That's the experience that strangers so often have.

But this is the experience of the child of God then as well, so often as a stranger in this world, that we have limited rights and privileges. I just read it on the Internet a few days ago, we are the fringe. That's the word that was used. We are the fringe. Sometimes the Christian is marginalized. He has certain opportunities that are closed to him simply because he's a Christian. Or maybe he's just tempted to hide his Christian identity so that he has access to those opportunities that would not otherwise be afforded him. A Christian is one who lives in a foreign country. He's not valued in that foreign country according to his actual birth and his pedigree. Think about that for a moment. What is our identity? We are princes and we are princesses. We are of royal birth. We are children of the Most High God and yet so often the children of God have to walk up and down this earth like princes in disguise. We can't enjoy the privileges that are ours like we would be able to if we were back home in our home country.

A stranger is also one who is very careful not to insist on his rights while he's in that foreign country, right? So the way we have to live is patiently. We can expect hardship. We can expect to be discriminated against. We can expect to be treated as strangers by the world. After all, we are strangers. That's how it is with the Christian. A stranger, think of a stranger, how he acts. He's wary that he may not give offense. He doesn't want to incur the hatred and displeasure of the natives. He's living as peaceably as he possibly can with all men. A stranger is content with a pilgrim's fare and a pilgrim's lodging, just a tent. After all, in the end, I am only passing through. A Christian, therefore, is even thankful of the least favor and the least blessing. A Christian, therefore, is humble because for a stranger, anything that a stranger has in that strange country is really more than he can expect to have because he is a stranger.

And third, a stranger is one who has a different culture, a different worldview, and way of living. Just think of that in the world. In the world, there are different cultures that exist, even just different ways that people think, different ways people treat time. Some are more punctual with their time, some are more emphatic about the relationships. Forget the time, let's focus on the relationship. There are different views of life and death or what we should be living for. And so it is with the Christian in this world that he is a stranger because his entire view of life is radically different from the world's. The world, the people of the world are living for the here and now. The world's inner desire is that they could live on the earth forever. But the Christian has this attitude, "Life is a parade

that quickly is over and except life is lived for God and with God, life is vanity and nothing but a sigh of air." The Christian is one whose attitude is this, "I don't care to buy those things that I cannot take with me back home but I care to buy those things and work for those things that are portable and that I can take with me as I enter into my home country so that I buy the truth and I sell it not. My treasures are not in earthly things but in heavenly things. My pursuit is not for the things of this world but holiness and godliness and enjoying the fruits of the Spirit." Though the pilgrim seeks to be a blessing in the land where he finds himself, the heart of the pilgrim is in heaven back home with Christ and he can never be fully satisfied until he is there back in his home country.

And so now we put all these things together and the reality is for the stranger and sojourner on the earth, there is a certain amount of discomfort. He is not settled. He is not at home. In a sense, he is not at ease in this world. That's the experience of the child of God and that's probably exactly part of the reason David uses this language because he feels his state in life to be so miserable at this time. He feels himself to be a stranger. We'll get to that later on in the sermon. Right now, this is what a stranger and a sojourner is. We're looking at the meaning of these words. This is what a stranger and sojourner is.

But now as we look again at the text, the Psalmist doesn't just say, "I'm a stranger and a sojourner." He says more, he says, "I am a stranger with thee." And now congregation, that makes all the difference. What is the Psalmist saying? Well, we all need to have it very clear in our minds this morning the Psalmist is not saying, "I am a stranger to thee." All right? That's the opposite. He says, "I am a stranger with thee." That is, "Even as I am walking this pilgrim life, God is with me and we are not strangers to each other, but we are companions with each other." That's the meaning and that is very striking. What it means is this: though David is a foreigner in this land, he is not a foreigner with God. He and God are friends and companions. They speak the same language, right, because they're from the same country. They speak the same language. They enjoy constant fellowship.

It means also this: though David does experience limited rights and privileges in this land, he doesn't experience those limitations with God. With God, David is never discriminated against as he is in the foreign land. With God, David always gets what is good. With God, David always enjoys, he always has access to the privileges he has in Christ. And always, God's dealings with David are righteous and just and loving. David is not a stranger to God.

And then third, it means this: though David experiences a different lifestyle and worldview and way of thinking than the wicked on the earth, David's culture and his lifestyle and worldview are not different from God's. David and his God think the same way because David has been given the mind of God through Jesus Christ. Though David is a stranger on the earth, David is not a stranger to God.

Well, what all of that implies, of course, is this: that God himself, in a certain sense, is also a stranger on this earth with David. It may seem strange to say that, but there's a perfectly clear sense in which that is true, that God is a stranger in his own world. This is

his own handiwork that he made and yet what does the fool say as he walks on the earth? The fool says, "There is no God." Everywhere, there are signs of the providence of God and yet, unbelievers refuse to see any traces of the finger or the mind or the heart of God because God is a stranger to him. He doesn't have that relationship with God.

Look at Jesus Christ. I think we see this very clearly in the life of Jesus Christ himself. Our Lord and Savior, God in the flesh, walking on the earth, is a man who is despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. He was a stranger among men. Yes, the foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man doesn't even have anywhere to lay his head. He's a sojourner. He's a stranger and a sojourner and as we bear our crosses, we are strangers with Jesus. The servant is not above his master. It is enough, it is enough that the servant be like his master and what is Jesus like? He is a stranger and sojourner on the earth.

And then what does Jesus say after he says those words, "It is enough that you be like your Master," Luke 9, Jesus says this, "Follow me." That's what discipleship is, being a stranger and sojourner. And why is it like this? It's like this exactly because we are strangers with God. What I mean is this is exactly how the life of the antithesis is lived out because the reality is I can either be a stranger with God, having God as my companion, or I can be a stranger with the world and, in a sense, then not be a stranger at all but be a stranger to God. It's one or the other. I can't have both. I can either walk with God and speak God's language and think God's thoughts with heaven as my home and destination, or I can walk with the world and speak the world's language and think the world's thoughts and have the world's standards and have this earth as my home and my destination. But I can't have both.

And then we hear the words from James, "Don't you know that friendship with the world is enmity against God?" And the more we walk with God, the more we will become estranged from the wicked and then you experience more keenly what it is to be a stranger and sojourner in the earth. Just like those heroes of faith in the Old Testament who wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented, who wandered in deserts and in mountains and dens and caves of the earth, of whom the world was not worthy. And you have that sense of alienation then that comes with it. All of this brings that sense of alienation. Giving up earthly things, giving up even good things, things that aren't wrong, yet giving them up for the sake of walking along this pilgrim pathway God calls me to walk.

I remember a seminary student, this is just one simple sliver of an example. You all have your own examples but just to share with you. I remember a seminary student, he was being examined before Synod and he talked about this very thing that we're talking about this morning. That seminary student was asked what was going to be something hard for him, right, in the changes that he was going to make in his transition in life. And he said, "I like listening to the Detroit Tigers on the radio, but being in the ministry and giving the ministry the kind of time it requires is probably going to mean giving this up for the sake of the work of the church." And that was his sliver of an experience of what it means to be that stranger and sojourner and that sense of alienation. And now that's our experience

in so many different ways, whatever our calling is, giving up the things of the world for our Christian walk and that brings with it a sense of loss, certainly to a certain degree. Being a stranger is not an ideal or a pleasant thing. After all, when you get to heaven, you will not be a stranger in heaven. You will not have that feeling at all. You will be at home. There won't be any strangeness or sojourning in heaven.

It's hard being a stranger and I think that's also important for us as a congregation to remember. When we have new members joining our congregation or those in the church who don't have much in the way of church family or even Christian family, wherever that's the case, it's harder than we often realize. Loneliness is real. In all these things, we get a little bit deeper of a sense of what it is to be a stranger with God as God uses even all these experiences to drive us closer to him. And all of this is what the text is talking about. This is the meaning of the text. "I am a stranger and a sojourner with thee."

But now, this text is not without its comfort. So far, we've been looking at a discouraging thing because we've been looking at what it means to be a stranger and sojourner but now this text is not without its comfort. In fact, and this is what we need to take home with us too, it is exactly this thought that David is a stranger with God that gives David his encouragement and his hope and his comfort. It's exactly this thought that gives him his comfort and this comfort comes from many different directions.

First, the comfort is this, David knows that God is always with him. David is lonely. He's a stranger. "But God is with me no matter where I go, whatever country I pass through or whatever experience I go through, God is with me." That first of all.

Second, the comfort is in this, David is able to see, and God brings David to see this, David is able to see that his present experiences in life are the exact same experiences that his spiritual fathers went through and that's very comforting also. What does David say? "I'm a stranger and a sojourner, I'm a stranger with thee and a sojourner as all my fathers were." David is saying, "Yes, I look back, I see God's people in church history and in scripture, and this is the experience of God's people." This is the experience of the Christian. Think of Abraham and his life was not unique. He's the father of believers. If I'm a believer, this is my life too. Think of Abraham sojourning in the land of promise as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise. This was the experience of Enoch in the days before the flood. This was the experience of Noah. Think of Noah, a stranger to the whole world around him, only eight souls left, and he endured severe mocking as he went on building that ark, doing the Lord's work. And now as David goes through these same experiences, he says, "This is how it is with God's people because, yes, ultimately God is leading us to greater things than these. I'm looking for that better country. I'm looking for that new world. I may not live with a short view of things. I may not do that. I must live with a long view of things. I'm looking for a city that has true foundations, a city that's going to last, because the builder of that city is God."

That's the second thing and then third, the comfort is in this, David knows that as a stranger with God, having God as his constant companion, enjoying that friendship with

God, he knows God will also hear and answer David's cries for help. And David even knows that God is actually helping him right now, in this moment, giving David this experience. God is helping him, even though David himself doesn't really, even though it doesn't really feel like it, he knows by faith God is helping him.

Now this is where I want to go to the Psalm as a whole and see how this text really fits into the Psalm as a whole. Here in Psalm 39, David is experiencing the chastening hand of the Lord. That's what this whole Psalm is about. It's about sin. David has sinned. We don't know what David has done, but God is chastening David. That's what we read in verse 11, "When thou with rebukes dost correct man for iniquity, thou makest his beauty to consume away like a moth: surely every man is vanity." David is speaking about what he himself is going through. In verse 9, we read, "I was dumb, I opened not my mouth; because thou didst it." We don't know what David has done. We don't really know how God was chastening David, but David is overwhelmed. In verse 1, it starts out, boom, right away it starts out, "I said, I will take heed to my ways, that I sin not with my tongue: I will keep my mouth with a bridle, while the wicked is before me." David is saying, "I am tempted to fall into immoderate sorrow. I am tempted to bewail my sufferings openly and unashamedly. I cannot handle God's chastening anymore."

David is tempted to indulge himself in sinful complaints against the Lord and so in verse 2, David says, "I was dumb with silence, I held my peace, even from good." David says, "I didn't have the spiritual strength even to speak good." This was wrong of David. David should have been speaking the praises of the Lord even as God was chastening him, but it was too hard for David. So he had to keep his mouth entirely shut and in keeping his mouth entirely shut, trying to avoid one fault, he falls into another fault. He wasn't bringing himself to humble himself properly before the Lord and so then you see the fire begins to burn within his heart, as the next verses go on to say. His heart begins to burn within him.

It doesn't say what sin David had committed, but looking at it very generally, we can imagine it was this, listen carefully to this: the sin that David probably had committed was this, exactly the fact that David had forgotten that he was a stranger with God and a sojourner on the earth. His hope had not been in God like it should have been. Rather, David had begun living for earthly things. That's why he's angry at the wicked. Maybe he had begun expecting too much from the world. Maybe he was putting too much stock in having a good outcome in all his earthly activities, maybe thinking that everything should be perfect in this world. And it was some great grief on David's mind, a frustration and an impatience deep within his soul. Maybe David was starting to focus too much on earthly riches and earthly prosperity, and then God stripped it all away from David and God started surrounding David on every side with miseries and in David's life, it seemed as if it was just a constant succession of calamities. "Everything's going wrong. I'm losing everything." And he begins to feel that God was simply dealing too severely with David. "God, it's not fair!" And David begins to react inappropriately and speak rashly. "All this life is vain. Everything is worthless. Surely, every man walketh in a vain show. Surely, they are disquieted in vain. He heapeth up riches, and knoweth not who shall gather them." It's like what David says in another Psalm, "I said in my haste, all men are liars."

David feels that life and all life has to offer is slipping through his fingers and the more he tries to be patient, trying to be patient under God's chastening hand, the harder it becomes for David to be patient. He's trying to be a strong man without giving everything over to the Lord and being at peace with the Lord and David gives expression to his sorrow and grief and frustration.

That's the first six verses of the Psalm and finally, as David's heart is in anguish and turmoil, and as God is chastening David in verse 7 now, David is finally brought to where he needs to be. He says, "And now, Lord, what wait I for? my hope is in thee." You see, God was chastening David to bring him spiritually to where he needed to be, to remember that he was a stranger on the earth and his hope needed to be in God. "Why do these earthly things so enchant me? Why do I live for the things that are vanity? After all, what should I actually expect from this world? My hope needs to be in God, and my hope is in God. Thy loving kindness is more than life to me," and so it needs to be. And that's where David is able to recollect himself and reorientate himself and fix himself on God once again.

This is not to say that David's griefs were over, but it is to say that David is learning to deal with his griefs properly. He is able to sigh and humble himself before God once again and trust in God once again. What does he do? Well, instead of lashing out in frustration, instead of keeping it all bottled up inside until he becomes hot and his heart is burning, David goes to the Lord in prayer. He humbly confesses his sins, and he looks to the Lord for his help. And he prayed and he treated God's dealings with him with reverence and honor and he remembered who he was as a stranger with God and sojourner in the earth.

And beloved, that's exactly what puts everything back into perspective for David. That's what gives David his comfort and peace and hope. He's a stranger with God. "I'm with God. I'm with God. That's my comfort. Yes, though I might have nothing in this world, I do have covenant fellowship with the Maker of heaven and earth. I do have peace with God through the blood of the Lamb. I know my sins are forgiven through Jesus Christ, the Lord my righteousness. He is the one to whom I belong. In him is my identity. And I know, I know that through him, God works all things together for my good, for this life and the life to come. I have Jesus Christ. I have the life of Christ beating in me. And truly in the end, this is where my comfort is. This is where my hope is found. I'm living for a place I have yet to see. My destination is glory and so I pray, Lord, help me." Right? Verse 13, "Spare me. Show me mercy as I know thou wilt in Jesus Christ. Spare me that I may recover strength before I go from here and be completely destroyed and be no more." And congregation, as you know, this is the life of David, this was a prayer that would certainly be answered and this is exactly where David needed to be. In the very writing of the Psalm, going through the Psalm, David is being brought to where he needs to be, walking as a companion with God indeed.

Jordan, this is the confession you made this morning, "I am a stranger with thee and a sojourner as all my fathers were." Jordan, be assured of this: no matter where you go in life, no matter what God may lead you through, no matter how he chastens you and deals with you in life, you know who you are in Jesus Christ. You know God is your Father

and you always have God as your companion as you make your sojourn through life. The calling of the passage is clear, Jordan, put your hope in God. Remember who you are as a stranger, born from above, partaker of Jesus Christ, and then remember as you continue on through life, this is how we must approach life, "I am a stranger with God and a sojourner as all my fathers were. I look in the scripture, I see the heroes of faith, those are my fathers. Those are all our fathers. My God is leading me, your God is leading you," that's what you must say. There is a better place coming to you. Walk as God's companion and put your hope in him and enjoy who he is then as your God indeed, the Lord Jehovah, faithful to his covenant. Amen.

Let us pray.

Our Father, we thank thee for thy mercy for it is of thy mercies that we are not consumed and it's of thy mercies that we don't go hence and be no more. We look to thee, Lord, even for this coming week. Give us thy mercy and strengthen us. Spare us. Equip us. Help us, Lord, and strengthen our faith in thee and then cause us to know what it is to be thy companion indeed, that we might exalt thy glorious name and we might confess that confession that gives thee the glory and honor that thou art our all-sufficiency and thou art our satisfaction and our all-in-all. Bless this preaching to our hearts and to our lives. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.