



## Psalm 39 - Prayer for Wisdom and Forgiveness

To the leader: to Jeduthun. A Psalm of David.

### Introduction

This psalm allows those who are suffering to express their bewilderment to God. The circumstances of the suffering are left vague, although there is acknowledgment of sin; the focus is on how suffering is a reminder of how fleeting a human life is.

### Psalm 39:1-3 - My Silent Musing.

The singer describes his experience of watching carefully over what he says in the presence of the wicked; after a while he could no longer contain himself. He is probably concerned with what he might say aloud in his suffering, perhaps blaming God. However, the faithful know they need to say something, and worship is the way to do it.

- <sup>1</sup> I said, 'I will guard my ways  
that I may not sin with my tongue;  
I will keep a muzzle on my mouth  
as long as the wicked are in my presence.'
- <sup>2</sup> I was silent and still;  
I held my peace to no avail;  
my distress grew worse,
- <sup>3</sup> my heart became hot within me.

While I mused, the fire burned;  
then I spoke with my tongue:

### Psalm 39:1-3

I will guard my ways that I may not sin with my tongue. David began this psalm by recounting his prayer, asking God's help in not speaking foolishly or sinfully when the wicked are in my presence. This promise of David is in line with the promises of God to him, which he passed on to his son Solomon as David's death approached: <<*Then the Lord will establish his word that he spoke concerning me: "If your heirs take heed to their way, to walk before me in faithfulness with all their heart and with all their soul, there shall not fail you a successor on the throne of Israel"*>> (1 Kings 2:4).

I was silent and still; I held my peace to no avail. David found it easier to speak nothing than to speak wisely. He soon felt the pressure that one feels when intense feelings are kept silent. In the previous psalm David showed his godliness by his silence before his accusers: <<*like the mute, who cannot speak*>> (Psalm 38:13b). In Psalm 38 the idea was that David did well to not defend himself. Here he did well to not speak his doubts and fears while the wicked are in my presence.

My heart became hot within me. In this instance silence was not golden for David. It brought him sorrow and inner turmoil, i.e. the fire burned. A burning heart can also be something good, such as that experienced by those who walked with Jesus on the Emmaus Road: <<*They said to each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?'*>> (Luke 24:32).

### Psalm 39:4-6 - My Fleeting Life.

The singer prays to know his end, and how fleeting he is, i.e. the brevity of human life. To really know this would protect him from wasting his life in turmoil that results when one heaps up wealth; there truly is a wiser way to live.

- <sup>4</sup> 'Lord, let me know my end,  
and what is the measure of my days;  
let me know how fleeting my life is.
- <sup>5</sup> You have made my days a few handbreadths,  
and my lifetime is as nothing in your sight.  
Surely everyone stands as a mere breath. Selah

6 Surely everyone goes about like a shadow.

Surely for nothing they are in turmoil;

they heap up, and do not know who will gather.

#### Psalm 39:4-6

Lord, let me know my end. David's silence was broken in the best way, by humble prayer to God. He would not speak his fears and doubts before the wicked, but he would pour them out before his God. Here David asked God for wisdom; specifically, the wisdom to know the shortness and the frailty of his life, that is, let me know how fleeting my life is: *<<A mortal, born of woman, few of days and full of trouble, comes up like a flower and withers, flees like a shadow and does not last. Do you fix your eyes on such a one? Do you bring me into judgement with you? Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? No one can. Since their days are determined, and the number of their months is known to you, and you have appointed the bounds that they cannot pass, look away from them, and desist, that they may enjoy, like labourers, their days>>* (Job 14:1-6).

Surely everyone stands as a mere breath. David was a champion, an accomplished warrior, a leader, a celebrity, a skilled poet, a musical genius, a survivor, and a king. If anyone might have thought more highly of himself, David had the right to. Yet he understood that he, like every man is merely a vapour, a puff of steam or smoke: *<<Remember that my life is a breath; my eye will never again see good>>* (Job 7:7), and: *<<Those of low estate are but a breath, those of high estate are a delusion; in the balances they go up; they are together lighter than a breath>>* (Psalm 62:9).

Selah. The idea in the Hebrew for this word, which occurs 74 times in the OT, is for a pause. Most people think it speaks of a reflective pause, a pause to meditate on the words just spoken. It may also be a musical instruction, for a musical interlude of some kind. This Selah is an appropriate call for each one to pause and think of the shortness and frailty of their life. It should drive people to great dependence upon God and great earnestness about life, and doing good in the short time they do have in this life.

Surely for nothing they are in turmoil. Sounding very much like the later Book of Ecclesiastes: *<<For who knows what is good for mortals while they live the few days of their vain life, which they pass like a shadow? For who can tell them what will be after them under the sun?>>* (Ecclesiastes 6:12), David thought about the mass of humanity that lived ignoring the shortness and frailty of life:

- Each of them walks about, but like a shadow, living a life with no substance.

- They are busy, but in vain, being blind to eternal things.
- Each of them works hard and heaps up riches yet does not think beyond their own short and frail life.

This is the land of shadows. Heaven is the land of reality, of true high definition.

**Psalm 39:7-13 - Request for Forgiveness and Relief.**

Being sure that the circumstances come from God, the singer declares his hope in God, asks God to deliver him from all his transgressions, and furthermore to take away the discipline. The act of making such a request is a frank admission that he has sinned and deserves God's rebukes for sin; it also takes to heart the lesson prayed for in vv.4-6.

David describes himself as a 'passing guest' or sojourner, which stresses his temporary residence in this life, a theme similar to his prayer: <<***For we are aliens and transients before you, as were all our ancestors; our days on the earth are like a shadow, and there is no hope***>> (1 Chronicles 29:15). Asking God to remove his stroke does not mean that he wants God to cease caring for him; rather, he asks God to turn away his angry gaze.

7 'And now, O Lord, what do I wait for?

My hope is in you.

8 Deliver me from all my transgressions.

Do not make me the scorn of the fool.

9 I am silent; I do not open my mouth,

for it is you who have done it.

10 Remove your stroke from me;

I am worn down by the blows of your hand.

11 'You chastise mortals

in punishment for sin,

consuming like a moth what is dear to them;

surely everyone is a mere breath. Selah

## Psalm 39:7-11

And now, O Lord, what do I wait for? My hope is in you. Perceiving the shortness and frailty of life made David put his expectation and hope upon God and not upon himself. In right standing and friendship with the Living God, David could understand and prepare for life beyond his earthly existence.

Deliver me from all my transgressions. David looked to God and not to himself for deliverance from sin. He knew, as the apostle Paul would later declare, that the focus should be on God and not self: <<*Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin. There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit*>> (Romans 7:24-8:4).

Remove your stroke from me; I am worn down by the blows of your hand. David prayed this prayer from a season of great weakness and the sense that he was under the painful correction of God. He successfully avoided speaking words of self-justification; as he poured out his heart to God, he also prayed for relief from his affliction.

Through lack of faith, David's ancestors had called out to die by the hand of God rather than face hunger in the wilderness: <<*The Israelites said to them, 'If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger'*>> (Exodus 16:3). God responded by providing manna from heaven, an early sign of what he was planning to do to save, not just a nation, but the whole world: <<*Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, "He gave them bread from heaven to eat."*>> Then Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world'>> (John 6:31-33).

You chastise mortals in punishment for sin, consuming like a moth what is dear to them. David's great sense of the shortness and frailty of life came under a deep and painful sense of the correction of God. It can be supposed that this was one of the reasons God sent his correction to David; to give him the hunger for, the prayer for, and the blessing of this wisdom.

12 'Hear my prayer, O Lord,  
and give ear to my cry;  
do not hold your peace at my tears.

For I am your passing guest,  
an alien, like all my forebears.

13 Turn your gaze away from me, that I may smile again,  
before I depart and am no more.'

### Psalm 39:12-13

Do not hold your peace at my tears. David appealed to Yahweh, the covenant God of Israel, asking that he answer with mercy upon David in his sense of separation from God.

For I am your passing guest, an alien, like all my forebears. David was not only a native Israeli, but the king of Israel. If anyone had a claim to citizenship it was he; yet he understood that his real home was in heaven and not upon this earth. Abraham shared the same view of life as did David: *<<By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God>>* (Hebrews 11:8-10).

If Christians are indeed strangers and sojourners, then it follows that:

- It is sure they have a home somewhere.
- It is not surprising that they sometimes long to get home.
- If they are strangers, then they should treat each other well.
- They ought never to envy the lot of sinners.
- What an easy thing it should be for a Christian to die.

Turn your gaze away from me, that I may smile again. Knowing that his weakness was due to the heavy hand of God upon him, David humbly asked God to look at him no longer with the eyes of correction. The psalm ends without resolution, but with determined appeal to and trust in the Lord.