

Psalm 39

*“How Much Longer, O Lord, Must I Be King?”**
For the choir director, for 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 as with a muzzle while the wicked are in my presence.’
- ² I was mute and silent,
I refrained even from good,
And my sorrow grew worse.
- ³ My heart was hot within me,
While I was musing the fire burned;
Then I spoke with my tongue:
- ⁴ ‘LORD, make me to know my end
And what is the extent of my days;
Let me know how transient I am.
- ⁵ Behold, You have made my days as handbreadths,
And my lifetime as nothing in Your sight;
Surely every man at his best is a mere breath. Selah.
- ⁶ Surely every man walks about as a phantom;
Surely they make an uproar for nothing;
He amasses riches and does not know who will gather them.
- ⁷ And now, Lord, for what do I wait?
My hope is in You.
- ⁸ Deliver me from all my transgressions;
Make me not the reproach of the foolish.
- ⁹ I have become mute, I do not open my mouth,
Because it is You who have done it.
- ¹⁰ Remove Your plague from me;
Because of the opposition of Your hand I am perishing.
- ¹¹ With reproofs You chasten a man for iniquity;
You consume as a moth what is precious to him;
Surely every man is a mere breath. Selah.
- ¹² Hear my prayer, O LORD, and give ear to my cry;
Do not be silent at my tears;
For I am a stranger with You,
A sojourner like all my fathers.
- ¹³ Turn Your gaze away from me, that I may smile again
Before I depart and am no more.’

David the Psalmist: This Psalm is ascribed to David, the poet, singer, and king. God anointed David to be king (1 Sam.16), but King Saul refused to yield and mobilized forces to kill him. He had presumably experienced at least one deliverance from King Saul, who was hunting him (Ps.18; 1 Sam.24).

v.2: “I was mute” continues David’s silence in the face of his opponents from Ps.38:13 – 14.

v.5c, 11c: “man is a mere breath” reminds us of God’s breath put into the body of Adam formed of earth (Gen.2:7).

Historical and Cultural Background

- *Hebrew Biblical Poetry:* These poets rhyme *concepts* more than *sounds*, where the rhyming goes from a general thought to a more specific one. That makes it nice for those of us who have to work from the English translation. Here’s an example of a rhymed concept in v.1. Consider what the poet is saying by pairing these two lines:

I said,	I will guard my ways	that I may not sin with my tongue;
	I will guard my mouth as with a muzzle	while the wicked are in my presence.

- *David’s Trust in God’s Promise:* David knew that God defended the human leaders He appointed, and also was faithful to fulfill promises He made.
 - *God Defended Human Leaders He Appointed:* In Numbers 12, Aaron and Miriam criticized Moses unjustly, and God defended Moses. In Numbers 16, Korah led a faction in wholesale rebellion, and God used the earth to swallow them up.

- *God Fulfilled His Promises:* In Genesis 1, God said, “Let there be light,” and then, there was light. Then in Genesis 12, God made promises to His people, and called them to trust Him. For example, God promised Abraham and Sarah He would give them a son despite them being dead in a reproductive sense. In 1 Samuel 16, God through the prophet Samuel anointed David to be king. That was God’s promise; David is trusting God to fulfill His word.

Discussion Questions

1. What is David experiencing? What emotion is this?
 - a. Consider v.1. Notice that “my ways” in v.1a becomes specifically “my mouth” in v.1b. Why would David choose to stay silent when his opponents, the wicked, are in his presence? So he doesn’t blurt out insults, or threaten them with curses or violence?
 - b. What is God’s plague and opposition?
 - i. Possibly a sense of burning conviction. Like when David called them “God’s arrows” in Psalm 38:2. In this case, David experiences something like the Egyptians in the Exodus. God’s judgment was on their gods, and then Israel went free. There is a part of David that is experiencing the judgment on his sin like a plague.
 - ii. Possibly also David’s own mortality. See below.
2. In v.3, David decides to finally speak, but to God. I would expect David to say, “God, deliver me!” Or, “God defeat my enemies!” Or, “God, make my enemies fall into the trap they made for me!” He said all these things in earlier Psalms. But what does he say?
 - a. Why would David pray, “Make me to know how short my life is?” So he knows that his life is fragile? Well, sort of. Specifically so that David knows that he won’t have much longer to go. Which is startling!
3. Has David given up on being and becoming king of Israel, as God promised him?
 - a. No, he doesn’t seem to have given up. He still seems to take the responsibility in stride and with seriousness. But he wants to know when he’ll be done!
 - b. Similarly, the apostle Paul in Philippians said this about following Jesus: “For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me, yet I cannot say which I will choose. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better, but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you.” (Philippians 1:21 – 24) If I live, I get to serve Jesus more. If I die, I get to go be with him.
 - c. King David is saying something similar, although with a great sense of tiredness. David is saying, “For to me, living faithfully to God is hard, and dying faithfully is also hard, but it will be a release. How long, O Lord, do I have to be king?”
 - d. Why would David say this? Because being the king anointed by God is hard!!
 - e. Application: Do we ever feel similarly, as followers of Jesus? We call people to the true king, Jesus. And yet very few people comparatively say yes. Few people really change their lives. We are still destroying the planet ecologically and economically. We are leaving more of a mess for future generations. Yet Jesus still calls us to talk about him, persuade others towards him, work in his name.
 - f. Illus: When I was advocating hard for people to develop the gift of giving through an economic discipleship curriculum called Lazarus at the Gate, helping people be aware of poverty across the globe, it was really hard and fairly discouraging. I didn’t want to stop, because it was meaningful, and it was serving Jesus. But I also wanted to know when it would end!!
 - g. This matters because God knows how hard it is to live for Him and serve Him! He welcomes our discouragement and anger. It’s okay. We can say these things to him. We can say, “How much longer do I have to be faithful?” We do want to be faithful. The issue again is a personal one: “How long, O LORD?”
 - h. Did Jesus feel something like this? Probably in relation to wearing a fallen human nature, and being and becoming the king of Israel in and through that fallen human nature. At the wilderness temptation and garden of Gethsemane, Jesus experienced sorrow and tiredness.
4. How does David remind himself of how temporary and short his life is? Not a life of long faithfulness, but a life of short faithfulness???
 - a. “Surely every man at his best is a mere breath” in v.4 and 11.
 - i. This comes from the Genesis picture of God breathing life into the earth and making Adam (Gen.2:7). It’s not to say that our bodies are unimportant or insignificant. It’s to say that our life is fragile, dependent on breath.
 - ii. He even puts a Selah after each of those. Selah is a pause. David wants people to reflect and linger on that thought.
 - b. We are “transient,” “as a phantom” (v.6a). We make an uproar for nothing. We don’t know who will gather the riches we collect.
 - c. But David still knows God as being with him, as a stranger and sojourner in the earth (v.12c, d).

5. David still asks God to deliver him from all his transgressions (v.8) and protect him from being the reproach – or byword – of the foolish. How does mortality fit this?
 - a. Death is the severe mercy from the garden. God did not want us to eat from the tree of life immediately, while we are in a corrupted state, lest we make our sin-sickness immortal, and make human evil, selfishness, and injustice immortal along with ourselves. God said, “Anything is better than that!” And we die as mortal beings, because God wants us to come to Jesus, who healed the sin-sickness in his own humanity, through death and resurrection. So we can be joined to Jesus by his Spirit, in newness of life (Romans 6:1 – 11).
 - b. So why has David become “mute” or speechless in the midst of the foolish? (v.9)
 - i. He doesn’t want to say anything dumb or sinful.
 - ii. He doesn’t want to say in their company that he looks forward to dying and being released from this role of being king, so he can just go be “in the house of the Lord,” and with God or wait for Jesus to resurrect him into a new body. That could give them the wrong idea. David’s vocation is unique – as king who has to endure being a king in exile.
 - c. What is the “plague” in v.10 that God put on David?
 - i. That’s a difficult thing to interpret. Possibly the hardship of being the king in exile, anointed but waiting to be enthroned. King Saul was installed by God’s hand, and King Saul is opposing David. So possibly King Saul is “the opposition of Your hand” by which David says, “I am perishing.”
 - ii. Possibly more internal. God is judging something out of David. Since David has already said that he wants God to deliver him from his transgressions, perhaps there is language here of God judging the gods of Egypt by plagues, in order to free Israel from Egypt.
 - iii. Possibly mortality itself. God is judging the sin-sickness out of David through mortality. That does fit with v.11, where God consumes everything “precious” to us in the sense of desires that we might go wrong with. God has us hope in Him and in the restored world He will remake in healed form (v.7).
6. In the last section, v.12 – 13, David asks something of God. What is it?
 - a. He appeals in v.12, and gives the substance in v.13.
 - b. “Turn your gaze away from me” is a puzzling inversion of the blessing, “The Lord make His face shine upon you” from Numbers 6:22 – 26.
 - c. Probably David means the intensity of God’s calling on David’s life. David can say to God that he is burdened by being and becoming king of Israel. He just wants to smile and relax before he dies and is no more on this earth (v.13).
 - d. This is the first Psalm where David specifies who the choir director is by name. That’s interesting. It’s like he wants the Israelites to know that there is something about his role that is wearying and hard and challenging. And it’s okay to express that to God. David says this on behalf of Israel. And in some sense, he says it on behalf of Jesus and us. God welcomes our lament and struggle like this.
 - e. If I were to retitile the Psalm, it would be, “How Much Longer, O Lord, Must I Be King?”