

"That I May Know How Frail I Am"

Psalm 39

This psalm seems to be given following Psalm 38 because of its content – it follows in context to the previous psalm. Although it is not considered a penitential psalm in that it doesn't have a direct confession of sin (although his sin is referenced in verse eight), it does have similarities to them especially in its acknowledgment of human frailty, suffering due to sin (hence its connection to Psalm 38), and a plea for God's mercy.

The title (superscription, as it's called) is a common one: "To the chief musician...a Psalm of David," with one addition – "to Jeduthun." This name appears in Psalm 62, also a psalm of David, and Psalm 77, a psalm of Asaph. Jeduthun was one of the chief musicians (or worship leaders as we'd know them today) appointed by David to oversee the musical aspects of worship in the temple (1 Chron. 25). He was an important figure in temple worship, which was carried on through his descendants (2 Chron. 35:15).

The occasion of the psalm is unknown, which, as I've stated before, is by design so that its universal application is seen rather than a specific occurrence.

As we read this psalm, all of us that have lived any length of time and have had to deal with the stress and struggles of life can find ourselves in David's place as he gave this solemn psalm.

I. SILENT STRUGGLE - VS. 1-3

A. Positively: to avoid sinning with his mouth and bringing reproach to the Lord - vs. 1.

1. This shows us that while we may struggle with frustration watching how the wicked prosper around us and seem "to get away with it" (a common thread throughout the poetical books), we need to keep that to ourselves.
2. The moral is, not everything we think needs to be said out loud, especially if it will cause the unsaved world around us to question God.

B. Negatively: this intent to keep silence came at a cost - vs. 2

1. The cost of helping those who may have been struggling themselves - "I held my peace, even from good" - vs. 2.
2. The cost to his own emotional instability - it just intensified the struggle he was having.

It's not always a good idea to keep things bottled up - as Solomon said, there is "a time to keep silence, and a time to speak" (Eccl. 3:7). The next verse shows this.

C. There is a breaking point to the struggle - vs. 3

Jeremiah said something similar but for a completely different reason. Even though it's a different circumstance and context, the point of keeping silence can lead to a breaking point is the same.

Jeremiah 20:7-10 [this is poetic in Hebrew]

⁷ O LORD, thou hast deceived me, and I was deceived: thou art stronger than I, and hast prevailed: I am in derision daily, every one mocketh me.

⁸ For since I spake, I cried out, I cried violence and

spoil; because the word of the LORD was made a reproach unto me, and a derision, daily.

⁹ Then I said, I will not make mention of him, nor speak any more in his name. But *his word* was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not *stay*.

¹⁰ For I heard the defaming of many, fear on every side. Report, *say they*, and we will report it. All my familiars watched for my halting, *saying*, Peradventure he will be enticed, and we shall prevail against him, and we shall take our revenge on him.

II. SPOKEN REFLECTION ON THE STRUGGLE - VS. 4-6

This is a conversation that was spoken to the Lord as David struggled with his frailties, and the shortness and frailty of life in general for all mankind.

A. Vs. 4 - this should be a prayer we pray - not to question God or to complain that life's too short but to simply ask Him to show us what He wants us to do in the time we have here in this life.

1. "Make me to know mine end, and the measure of my days" - he's not asking for longer life, just an understanding of the limits of this life, and his in particular.

Some think he's in such a state that he's asking how much longer he has to live so he can know when this sorrow will be over, and that may be part of it, but I believe he's seeking for wisdom ("make me to know") and humility to understand the shortness of life in order to live more intentionally.

Psalm 90:12

- ¹² So teach *us* to number our days, that we may

apply *our* hearts unto wisdom.

Ephesians 5:15-16

¹⁵ See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise,

¹⁶ Redeeming the time, because the days are evil.

Colossians 4:5

⁵ Walk in wisdom toward them that are without, redeeming the time.

2. "That I may know how frail I am" – the whole of the psalm seems to be focused on this subject. David is asking how to deal with all the trials of life, including the chastening of the Lord, when his life was so frail, so fragile and brief. He wasn't just overwhelmed with the prospect – he seems to truly want to know how to deal with it all.

B. Verse five (5) declares life to be brief.

1. This is the answer to verse four, declaring the brevity of life.
2. A "handbreadth" (the width of four fingers) was one of the shortest units of measurement in biblical times, emphasizing how **brief life is** in God's sight.
3. "Mine age [lifetime] is as nothing before thee" doesn't mean life is meaningless, but that compared to God's eternal nature, it is **insignificant in duration**.
4. "Every man at his best state is altogether vanity" – outside of the will of God and fellowship with Him, which gives His children purpose and

meaning (the opposite of vanity), all that man is or does is of little value ("vanity" – meaningless) when compared to God and eternity.

Ecclesiastes 1:1-3

¹ The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

² Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all *is* vanity.

³ What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?

C. Verse six (6) is a description of the folly of man without God - "vanity" described.

1. "Surely every man walketh in a vain shew" –

a) "Only as a **phantom** or a **shadow** doth each walk to and fro" – which shows that meaningless value of his life.

b) The word "shew" carries the idea here of appearance, not that of putting on a show, or showing off.

2. "Surely they are disquieted in vain" – they are anxious and in turmoil over the rushing about of their life, and, as the last part of the verse shows, it seems the rich are more prone to this than the poor.

III. SUPPLICATION FOR DELIVERANCE FROM THE STRUGGLE – vs. 7-11

A. Deliverance from anxiety – vs. 7

Verse seven (7) is an encouraging prayer for all of us – compared to the vanity of mankind in general,

what other hope would we have but in the Lord?!

B. Deliverance from sin and its power - vs. 8

David once again acknowledges his sin and asks that he be delivered from them – not merely from the chastisement that the sins brought but from the power of the sins themselves. He wanted delivered from all of them so that he would not bring reproach to the LORD.

C. Deliverance from the chastening hand of the Lord - vs. 9-11

1. Verse nine (9) seems to be a turning point in the psalmist's struggle. Instead of **venting frustration**, he now **accepts God's sovereignty** in his suffering. His silence is no longer a burden but an act of **humility and trust**, showing that sometimes **silence before God speaks louder than words**.
2. Verse ten (10) is David's prayer for the chastening hand of God to be removed for whatever chastening he was going through.
3. Verse eleven (11) points out that the rebuke of the Lord makes man's "beauty to consume away like a moth."
 - a) "His beauty" isn't confined to beauty as we know it as to appearance but also includes that which man delights in or desires in life. The Geneva Bible notes makes this comment: "The word signifies all that he desires, as health, force, strength, beauty, and in whatever he has delight, so that the rod of God takes away all that is desired in this world."

- b) Consumed “like a moth” – not as a moth is consumed but as a moth consumes or destroys valuable objects, especially clothing, which was one of the most important objects those in biblical times had that demonstrated **their importance or their desires.**
- c) “Surely every man is vanity” – repeats the statement at the end of verse five (5) about the vanity of life without the Lord, including His chastening rebuke.

IV. STRENGTH AFTER THE STRUGGLE – VS. 12-13

- A. Verse twelve (12) finds David asking God to hear him and recognize his weakness brought on by the struggles he’s had (“hold not thy peace at my tears”).
- B. Verse thirteen (13) is his desire to “recover strength” before he dies (“be no more”). He wanted to have the fellowship with the Lord that he once knew restored and the strength to handle whatever came his way until his life ended.

Conclusion: The time we have in this life may be short and outside of God may be of little value relative to eternity, but as a child of God, a servant of the Most High, we not only have value and worth but we have a purpose for which God has left us here after salvation – a purpose of glorifying Him by pointing people to Christ.

This psalm is given to help us know that we’re still frail human beings and will struggle with many things and that those struggles can get to the point of overwhelming us to where we become of little value to the cause of Christ. That’s what we are to avoid.