

Psalm 39 “A Song from the Mute Shadows”
Psalm 39
1 Peter 1

September 3, 2023

Psalm 39 is a song from the mute shadows.

One of the early fathers commented that “This psalm...is instructive beyond any other,
...in how to...endure in the midst of hardship.” (Theodore of Mopsuestia 307)

Psalm 39 says,

“I am mute; I do not open my mouth, for it is you who have done it.”

I am afflicted and in trouble – because of *your stroke*.

Sometimes God puts you in a situation where you have nothing to say –
indeed, he calls you to say nothing.

Sometimes, if you say *anything*, you will make things worse.

David realizes this.

Sometimes the way we engage in spiritual warfare is through silence.

So David is silent.

“He had no wish whatever to do the will of him who ruins one’s peace of mind.”
And so he said nothing. (Ambrose, 307)

This runs contrary to everything we think.

We tend to think that if we say something – we can fix things!

But in our anger, our tendency is to react with bitter words.

And sometimes there are no words that can make a situation better!

If you know your sin, be silent, as Ambrose says:

“Do not add to your guilt by denying it!

If you are not aware of sin, be silent.

You are secure in your innocence.

The reports of other people cannot nail any sin to a conscience
that knows itself to be innocent” (Ambrose, 308)

So if you would know how to endure in the midst of trials and troubles,
then learn how to sing Psalm 39.

Sing Psalm 39

Read 1 Peter 1

Peter refers to us as “elect exiles of the dispersion.”

We are elect – chosen by God.

And yet we are exiles – we are citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem,

who live yet in exile here in this age.
And we are ‘of the dispersion’ –
we are dispersed throughout this present age.

But notice that Peter has more to say about what it means to be elect exiles!
Indeed, verses 1-2 provide a Trinitarian structure to this.

We are elect exiles “according to the foreknowledge of God the Father” –
there is nothing accidental or mistaken about it!
We are elect exiles because God the Father has chosen us to be elect exiles!
And we are elect exiles “in the sanctification of the Spirit” –
the Holy Spirit is setting us apart – making us holy – drawing us near to God.
And we are elect exiles “for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood.”

God the Father chose us.
God the Son sprinkled us with his blood – that we might be his!
God the Holy Spirit sanctifies us and makes us holy –
and all of this that we might live as elect exiles,
his chosen people.

It is not all that important that you *understand* the doctrine of the Trinity.
It is of crucial importance that you *know* and *love* the Triune God –
that you know and love God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

The theme of being chosen by God as elect exiles is also found in our Psalm – Psalm 39.
Psalm 39 itself connects with David’s prayer in 1 Chronicles 29:15,
“For we are strangers before you and sojourners as all our fathers were.
Our days on the earth are like a shadow, and there is no abiding.”
All mankind is a mere breath.

We’ll see next time (in Psalm 40) that the incarnation of the Word
is the very heart of the conclusion to Book One of the Psalter.
We’ll start hearing echoes of Psalms 1 and 2 as we wrap up this first part of the Psalter –
But Psalm 39 begins moving us in that direction –
even in the title of the Psalm!

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

Many Psalms are directed “to the choirmaster” –
a term that reminds us that the Psalms were designed for the corporate worship of Israel.

Nearly half of the songs in book One have had this direction (19 out of 41).

But here in Psalm 39, we notice a new name in the title: Jeduthun.

Psalms 39, 62, and 77 all name Jeduthun.

Who was Jeduthun – and why should we care that this is “to Jeduthun”?!
Jeduthun was a music master in the time of David.

1 Chronicles 25:3 says that Jeduthun
“prophesied with the lyre in thanksgiving and praise to the Lord.”
So to say that Psalm 39 is “to Jeduthun”
suggests that it connects to Jeduthun’s prophesying.

So Psalm 39 is still a “David-psalm” –
the first person singular is the voice of David –
but it connects the voice of David to the music of Jeduthun
and the singing of the Levitical choir.

In other words,
all of this encourages us to think of ourselves as the Levitical choir –
who sing Psalm 39 with our Lord Jesus!

One of features of this song is the frequent repetition of the possessive pronoun “my.”
My ways – my tongue – my mouth – my presence (v1)
My peace, my distress (v2)
My heart, my tongue (v3)

This is fairly common in laments – because the lament is focusing on *my* situation.
One effect of this is that the whole Psalm is very *me-centered*.
Even as the prayer starts in verses 4-5,
the language of “my end...my days...my lifetime” continues.
Only in verse 6 does it open up to all humanity –
and then as the focus shifts to God,
notice how the “me-focus” continues:
v7 – my hope, my transgressions, my mouth...
v12 – my prayer, my tears, my fathers...

Because this is my problem:
even though I can see my sin – and I can certainly see my misery –
I cannot escape *me*.
I am stuck in a me-centered universe.
And my only hope is *you*.

1. Silence: When Holding My Peace Is Not an Option (v1-3)

a. Guarding My Ways and My Tongue (v1)

*39 I said, “I will guard my ways,
that I may not sin with my tongue;*

*I will guard my mouth with a muzzle,
so long as the wicked are in my presence.”*

Verse 1 sets an honorable starting point.

“I will guard my ways, that I may not sin with my tongue.”

The Psalmist recognizes that the tongue is a fire – a world of evil –
that sets ablaze the whole body (to use the language of James).

It is *so easy* to sin with your tongue.

It is so easy to make a wasteland of your relationships through what you say.

And particularly when you are in the wrong company:

“I will guard my mouth with a muzzle, so long as the wicked are in my presence.”

You *know* that they will misconstrue whatever you say.

They will twist your words to the harm of many.

So don't give them anything to work with!

We should be open and forthright people.

We should be *truth-tellers*.

But when you are dealing with those whom you *know* to be wicked –
manipulative, abusive people who are trying to destroy others –
guard your mouth with a muzzle!

Anything you say can and will be used against you!

But here's the problem:

You can't stay quiet forever!

As verse 4 will tell us, the *topic* is that of suffering.

The temptation is to blame God for my suffering.

When life is hard, it can be easy to blame God.

And particularly in verses 2-3, we see how the Psalmist's distress only got worse:

b. My Distress Provoked Me to Speak with My Tongue (v2-3)

² *I was mute and silent;*

*I held my peace to no avail,
and my distress grew worse.*

³ *My heart became hot within me.*

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

There comes a point where you cannot remain silent.

My heart became hot – the fire burned –

What happens next when your heart becomes hot?

Usually when the fire burns our tendency is to lash out at others!!

But that is not what David does.

When our souls are properly tuned to the LORD our God –
then when our hearts become hot – when the fire burns –
we pour out our souls to the LORD!

There are definite echoes of the book of Job here.

After seven days of sitting in silence with his friends,
Job finally spoke.

And verses 4-6 reflect very much on the sorts of themes that Job does.

2. Shadows: The Futility of Human Life (v4-6)

a. My End Is Near (v4-5a)

⁴ *“O LORD, make me know my end
and what is the measure of my days;
let me know how fleeting I am!*

⁵ *Behold, you have made my days a few handbreadths,
and my lifetime is as nothing before you.*

When we get overheated – the proper place to blow up is before the LORD!
Not *against* the LORD – but *before* the LORD.

Make me know my end.
Make me know the measure of my days.
Let me know how fleeting I am.

I am here today – and gone tomorrow.

You may notice a somewhat curious train of thought here:

In verse 4, the Psalmist asks God to instruct him regarding the transience of life –
and then in verses 5-6, the Psalmist seems to complain about the transience of life.
I want to understand the truth about how fleeting I am –
and yet, because I am so fleeting, I don't have much time to learn it!
So if you take too long in teaching me, I may never get there!

And this is not just a problem for me – this is true for everyone!

b. And This Is True for Everyone – Every Adam Is an Abel (v5b-6)

Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath! Selah

The word translated “breath” is the Hebrew word *hebel* – which means “vapor” –
the word translated “vanity” in Ecclesiastes –

(It's also the *name* of Abel in the book of Genesis).

Think of the story of Cain and Abel.

Abel had offered a better sacrifice – and God accepted Abel's sacrifice.

His brother, Cain, was jealous
So what did Cain do?

He killed his brother.

Abel's life was *hebel* – a vapor – a mere breath.

But now Psalm 39 says that all mankind (all Adam) stands as a mere breath (an Abel).

Just like in the story of Genesis,

the story of humanity is that Adam becomes Abel.

Everyone dies –

and not just “dies” – but everyone dies a miserable death.

⁶ *Surely a man goes about as a shadow!
Surely for nothing^[a] they are in turmoil;
man heaps up wealth and does not know who will gather!*

And that same word “hebel” comes back in verse 6.

Surely for vapor – for hebel – they are in turmoil.

Man heaps up wealth and does not know who will gather!

Oh, you may *think* that you are heaping up wealth for your children –
but you do not know the future.

This week I had a chance to see a massive conference center

that was built less than 50 years ago for an evangelical Christian ministry empire.

The empire came crashing down.

And now what happens to the hundreds of millions of dollars that were donated
and invested into property and buildings and ministries...

Surely for nothing – for *hebel* – for vapor – they are in turmoil;
man heaps up wealth and does not know who will gather.

Life is short.

And then you die.

My life is but a few handbreadths long.

The Genesis imagery continues, though, in this verse.

When it says “surely a man goes about as a shadow”

the word man is the word “ish” (the word used for “male” in Genesis 1),

and the word “shadow” is actually the word translated “image” in Genesis 1.

Surely a man walks about as an image.

Certainly a shadow is an image –
but given the language of adam and abel in this context,
it is not accidental that we are talking about man as *image*.

But the image here is a darkened and clouded image – truly, a *shadow* of his former self.
Rather than being fruitful and multiplying, filling the earth and having dominion,
man is in turmoil – an uproar – murmuring about *hebel* –
murmuring about vanity and vapor.

We raise a fuss about nothing.

What is all the fuss about?
Vapor.
What are you striving for?

And this is the turning point in verse 7:

3. Discipline: My Hope Is in the One Who Has Afflicted Me (v7-11)

a. My Hope: You (v7)

⁷ “*And now, O Lord, for what do I wait?*
My hope is in you.”

In verses 7-11, we see 1) my hope, 2) my transgressions, 3) my mouth –
and then *your hand* and *your discipline*.

Finally, all of the “me-me-me” language is interrupted by *you!*

My hope is in you.
How are you going to get out of this mess?
No, my hope is in you.
Wait, I know – I’ve got a great idea!
No. My hope is in you.
If I just do this – and I try that – if I only just say this...
NO!! My hope is in you.

When will that get through your thick skull?
(When will it get through mine?)

My hope is in you.

I can’t fix this.

That’s why verse 8 is so important to the song:

b. My Transgressions: Why I Need Deliverance! (v8)

⁸ *Deliver me from all my transgressions.
Do not make me the scorn of the fool!*

The central part of my problem *is me*.

Sure, there are others out there – the scorn of the fool is very real! – and I don't like it! –
but if you deliver me from all my transgressions,
then I can endure anything.

We've been seeing this pretty consistently in this section of the Psalter.

If I am rightly related to God,
what can man do to me?

This is why we have a prayer of confession every week –
it's why we need to confess our sins to God every day!

My hope is in *him*.

And so

c. My Mouth: Mute (v9)

⁹ *I am mute; I do not open my mouth,
for it is you who have done it.*

Why am I silent?

Because *you* have done this.

You have acted.

My situation – this *really hard place* where I am right now –
is *your* doing.

You, my God, who tenderly loves your own –
you have laid upon me this suffering –
and if you have done it, then it must be designed not for my destruction,
but for my salvation. (Hengstenberg, II, 60-61)

And therefore, I wait patiently for my God.

Patiently – yes.

But silence does not mean that I say nothing!

Even in my silence, I still speak to God!

Think of Zechariah – the father of John – whose silence was imposed by God.

He may have been mute before man,

but he undoubtedly poured out his soul to God!

d. Your Hand: What Has Done This (v10)

¹⁰ *Remove your stroke from me;*

I am spent by the hostility of your hand.

There are some who would say that good things come from God – and bad things from the devil.
But the Psalmist understands that even the *bad things* come from the hand of God.
And there are times when God’s hand is *against* us –
when God is hostile – not in the sense of seeking to *destroy* his children –
but in our experience that God is against us!

And *yes*, there *are* times when God is against us!

When you are going the wrong direction – God is against you!

And the point of Psalm 39 is that *this particular suffering* (v11) is because of your sin:

e. Your Discipline (v11)

*¹¹ When you discipline a man
with rebukes for sin,
you consume like a moth what is dear to him;
surely all mankind is a mere breath! Selah*

Let me say this really simply:

When you make something more dear to you than God,
then God gets jealous.
The LORD our God is a jealous God.
Jealousy is a *good thing*.

If your wife is flirting with all the guys – going out on dates with other men –
and you are not jealous – then there is something *very wrong* with you!

Well, when some created thing is more dear to you than the One who made it,
then God gets jealous.

And the next thing you know, that thing – that created thing –
that thing that you love more than God –
will be consumed – like a moth consumes woolen cloth.

One commentator says it well:

Verse 12 should “remind us of the moth about which Jesus made a pointed remark.
In the same breath He also referred to the remorseless corrosion effected by rust.
Only if we take this in utter seriousness
shall we have a cure against the desperate urge of
“catching up with the Joneses”
and against other urges that tear us apart...
Only the view of eternal life, stressed in the Gospels

can resolve the agony that prompted Augustine to conclude:
‘Restless is our soul until it finds its rest in you, O Lord’” (Jaki p. 91).

Surely all mankind is a mere breath!

Surely every Adam is but an Abel.

Nothing has really changed since that first generation.

Sin, misery, and death – vapor and vanity – is what characterizes humanity.

That’s why we need the blood that speaks a better word than the blood of righteous Abel!

Hebrews 12 reminds us that the blood of our Lord Jesus cleanses us from sin –

because his blood is the blood of the new covenant –

his blood speaks the word of atonement and pardon.

He brings us into the heavenly Holy of Holies – where we behold the glory of the Lord!

4. Prayer: The Cry of the Sojourner (v12-13)

And that is where the cry of sojourner in verse 12 must be heard:

a. Hold Not Your Peace at My Tears (v12)

¹² *“Hear my prayer, O LORD,
and give ear to my cry;
hold not your peace at my tears!*

Don’t be okay with my suffering!

You see my affliction.

What are you going to do about it?

When you see someone in tears – it should move you.

And if *we* are moved by the tears of others,
how much more the Lord God who created them!

Hold not your peace at my tears!

And truly, God has promised that he will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

God will remember your tears!

But notice again – and again –

how the Psalmist always brings his frustrations and complaints to God *in faith*:

*For I am a sojourner with you,
a guest, like all my fathers.*

Truly, I have not found such faith in all Israel.

Jesus said that of a Gentile.
But it applies equally to the Psalmist!

“I am a sojourner”?

If anyone could claim to be at *home* with God,
it would be David.

After all, God *promised* Israel the *land*.

Israelites prided themselves on their *inheritance* in the land!

Sojourners were outsiders – foreigners.

But *we* are God’s chosen people!

But David says,

“I am a sojourner with you, a guest, like all my fathers.”

Never forget that you were *once* darkness.

You were strangers – aliens – foreigners.

Even the Jews!

Even David!

That is why the word became flesh and *dwelt among us*.

Only when the Word sojourned with us
could we become children of God.

Only when the eternal Son of God joined himself to our nature
could our nature become partakers of the divine nature!

And so the Psalmist cries out to God:

b. Stop Looking at Me (v13)

¹³ *Look away from me, that I may smile again,
before I depart and am no more!*”

Stop looking at me!

Normally we expect to hear the Psalmist ask for the eyes of the LORD to be upon him –

“Look upon me in my distress” –

because when God sees me in the midst of my trouble,
he will take pity on me and rescue me.

But here the Psalmist says “look away from me, that I may smile again...”

Stop looking at me.

Your gaze pierces me to my soul!

Your holy eyes that are too pure to look upon sin –

and therefore you are chastening me and correcting me
and purifying me –

and I just can’t take it anymore!!

Please look away from me – that I may smile again before I die!

It's okay to say to God,
“God, I can't take it anymore!”
So long you keep saying “my hope is in you.”

In Luke 5:8, we hear Simon Peter say, “Lord, depart from me, for I am a sinful man.”

Notice how Peter says that:
“*Lord* – depart from me”!
I recognize who you are!
You are the Holy One.
You are Lord.

And I am a sinful man!
The presence of God is an amazing thing –
but for a sinful man – it is a terrifying thing!

Why does God discipline us?
We are so frail and fleeting!
And we all die!

What is God doing?

God knows our frame!
He knows our desperation and our weakness.

So in your desperation – in your times of trouble and affliction –
call out to him –
pour out your soul to him!

He made you – he knows how you work.

And what is more – indeed, what is beyond our comprehension, is that –
He came in your flesh –
He came in your weakness.
He bore all our infirmities and carried all our sorrows.

He did not content himself with knowing *about* our weaknesses and our afflictions.
He endured them himself when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.