

Psalm 39

Title: The Vanity of Life

Author and Date: David

Key Verses: Psalm 39:4-6, 11, 13

Type: Lament

Outline

- A. Time for silence – silence in the presence of the wicked (verses 1-3).
- B. Time for speaking – speaking about the vanity of life (verses 4-6).
- C. Time for supplication – supplication to God for deliverance (verses 7-13).

Notes

Title: “For the Chief Musician, for Jeduthun.” See the notes on Psalm 4. “Jeduthun” was a Levite of the family of Merari. He was one of the music directors who had a family of musicians in the time of David (1 Chron. 16:41-42; 25:1-6; 2 Chron. 5:12; 29:14; 35:15). This title is also found in Psalm 62 and Psalm 77. “A Psalm of David.” See the notes on Psalm 3.

Summary: Psalm 39 addresses the reality of the brevity (vanity) of life. The psalmist has sorrow as he keeps quiet in the presence of the wicked, but then he speaks (verses 1-3). When he speaks, he acknowledges how frail and brief life really is (verses 4-6, 11, 13). The psalmist plans to hope in the Lord and confess his sin (verses 7-8). Because life is brief and the Lord’s rebuke is strong, he asks the Lord to remove his divine chastisement and spare him (verses 8-13). This psalm is categorized as a lament because the psalmist is filled with sorrow (verse 2), agitation (verse 3), tears (verse 12), and a sense of pain due to his sin (verses 8-13).

Verses 1-2: The psalmist guarded his tongue in the presence of the wicked (Psa. 38:13-14).

Verse 3: The words “hot with me” and “the fire burned” refer to a man that is burning with some kind of inward agitation or turmoil (Psa. 32:3; Jer. 20:9).

Verse 5: “Handbreadths” is a measurement (Ex. 25:25; 37:12; etc.) and it refers to the width or thickness (1 K. 7:26) of four fingers together (about three inches). A man’s life is short, just four fingers wide. “Vanity” comes from the Hebrew word *hebel* meaning “breath”. Using these two words, the psalmist says that a man’s life is brief and fragile. Compare the use of “vanity” in this psalm with the book of Ecclesiastes (1:2, 14; 2:1, 11; etc.). For “Selah” (here and verse 11), see the notes on Psalm 3.

Verse 6: “In a vain show” is literally, “in a shadow.” Man’s life is like a brief shadow.

Verses 9-11: The psalmist was silent and did not complain or argue with the Lord. He silently and meekly accepted his divine chastening for sin. He believed that he was being divinely chastened and punished for his sin – “because thou didst it ... the blow of thy hand ... thou with rebukes” (compare with Psalm 38:1-10 and 90:4-12).

Verse 11: “Like a moth” is a reference to the moth that eats and consumes the beauty of clothing.

Questions

1. What does the psalmist take care to guard and when did he do it (verses 1-2)?
2. What part of the psalmist was hot (verse 3)?
3. What does the psalmist want to know from the Lord (verse 4)?
4. How does the psalmist describe his life and that of man (verse 5)?
5. How does man walk and what does he not know about his riches (verse 6)?
6. Who does the psalmist wait for and hope in (verse 7)?
7. What does the psalmist want to be delivered from (verse 8)?
8. Why was the psalmist silent and what does he want removed (verses 9-10)?
9. What happens when man is rebuked by God for his iniquity (verse 11)?
10. What request does the psalmist have for the Lord and why (verse 12)?

11. Why does the psalmist want to be spared and when (verse 13)?

Applications for Today

1. There is a time to keep silent and a time to speak. We need to have the wisdom to know when to speak and when to be silent (verses 1-3). What does Ecclesiastes 3:7 say? What sin does James warn against (Jas. 3:1-12)?
2. We need to know that our days are measured and our life is brief (verses 4-6). What does the psalmist want to be taught in Psalm 90:12? How does James describe the life of man (Jas. 4:14) and what encouragement does he give (Jas. 4:17)? What does Jesus warn about concerning the culmination of riches in this life (Lk. 12:15-20)? What are we to do and not do with our riches (1 Tim. 6:6-10, 17-19; Heb. 13:5-6)?
3. We need to live with hope in the Lord and with a desire to be delivered from our transgressions (verses 7-8). Who are we to have our hope in (1 Tim. 4:10; 5:5; 6:17)? Who makes possible deliverance from our transgressions today and how (Heb. 9:17)?
4. It is best to keep quiet when we are chastened by the Lord so that we do not sin with our lips (verse 9). What did Job do when he was chastened by God (Job 1:22; 2:10)?
5. The Lord chastens us and rebukes our iniquity in order to correct us (verses 10-11). What does the chastening of the Lord show about himself and what does it accomplish (Heb. 12:5-11)?
6. We are simply passing through this life as a “stranger” and “sojourner” (verse 12). What did Abraham become by faith (Heb. 11:9)? How does Peter describe the life of a Christian and what admonition does he give him (1 Pet. 1:1; 2:11)?
7. We have one life to live and need to make the best of it (verse 13). Where do we go after we die and can we change our destiny (Lk. 16:19-31)? How many times do we die and what follows death (Heb. 9:27)?