

Psalm 39

Introduction

1. **Author:** Written by David for Jeduthun, one of his three choir directors
2. **Category:** It is a personal lament which is a deeply emotional expression of grief:
 - a. David is clearly in grief
 - b. He is struggling greatly with some internal issue
 - c. It is clear that he is under the chastisement of the Lord, but there is no indication why
3. **Purpose:**
 - a. It's not exactly clear why or when David wrote this psalm but two possible suggestions are:
 - 1) After he sinned by ordering a census of Israel and numbering his army (1 Chronicles 21:1-19)
 - 2) After his sin with Bathsheba, and possibly while he mourned the impending death of his newborn son (2 Samuel 11-12, esp. 12:15-24)
 - b. What's interesting about these two events in David's life is that each had huge consequences, and not just on his own life but the lives of others:
 - 1) In the case of the census, David's sin caused the death of 70,000 Israelites
 - 2) In the case of Bathsheba, his sin caused the death of Uriah, the death of his son, and the death of future descendants (2 Samuel 12:10)
 - c. Now this is pure speculation, but I suspect that David might have written this Psalm after one of the events above, most likely the sin with Bathsheba (i.e. suspecting that 39:11 might be a reference to the death of his son)
4. **Structure:** there are two different ways to structure or outline this Psalm
 - a. Option 1:
 - 1) David's Silence before God (1-3)
 - 2) David's Prayer (4-13)
 - b. Option 2:
 - 1) David's despair (1-6)
 - 2) David's Hope (7-13)
5. **Poetic Elements:**
 - a. Non-typical three line stanzas—two line stanzas are more common and seem to create a more pleasant rhythm to a psalm; the use of three line stanzas here seems to give it more tension (maybe in line with the theme of grief???)
 - b. Word Pictures: "**heart hot within me**", "**fire burned**", "**days as handbreadths**", man as a "**breath**" (two more times), "**phantom**", "**consume as a moth**"

A. David's Silence (1-3)

1. David begins with a reflection on his commitment to not complain about his circumstances (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.’”**
 - a. David clearly ties speaking here with sin, but what could he say that would result in sin?
 - b. A clue is found in v. 9 where David declares that the reason he stayed mute was because he knew that his circumstances were a result of his own sin AND God’s chastisement
 - c. This verse is best understood as a reference to complaining, possibly against God
 - d. David knew that such complaining would simply further his sin, and even reflect poorly on God before his enemies
 - e. See James 1:13-16

2. So, he remained silent and fell deeper into despair (2): **“I was mute and silent, I refrained even from good, and my sorrow grew worse.”**
 - a. David uses two words here to describe his silence:
 - 1) **Mute**: comes from the word meaning to bind, and when used in the Niphal stem as it is here it refers to being made dumb or mute (Niphal stem is passive or reflexive)
 - 2) **Silent**: is also in the Niphal stem and here refers to being quite or still
 - 3) One might get the impression here that David’s silence wasn’t completely voluntary, but also imposed upon him by his own sin and guilt: after all, what could he possibly say to God?

 - b. His silence, however, had a down side: **“I refrained even from good, and my sorrow grew worse.”** (2b)
 - 1) It’s not clear here what David meant by refraining even from good
 - 2) Since it follows directly his comments regarding being mute and silent, it is likely the good that he refers to here is good speech, or possibly prayer.
 - 3) As a result, he fell deeper and deeper into despair:
 - a) He was in tremendous anguish: **“and my sorrow grew worse” and “my heart was hot within me” (2-3)**
 - The word for sorrow is used thirty times in the OT and all but 4 of those are in the psalms
 - It’s a word that describes pain, sometimes physical but almost always emotional or mental

 - b) The more he thought about his circumstances or situation, the more distressed he became: **“while I was musing the fire burned...”** (3)

B. David’s Prayer (4-13)

1. He prays for a proper perspective on life (4-6):
 - a. This section is where David begins to finally speak to the Lord: **“Then I spoke with my tongue, Lord...”**
 - b. The main theme of this section is the brevity of life: **“Make me to know my end and what is the extent of my days; let me know how transient I am.”** (transient means to last for only a short time)
 - 1) He describes his life as a **“handbreadth”** (5) which refers to the length of one’s hand

- 2) He describes his earthly life as **“nothing”** (5) in God’s sight (emphasizing length, not value)
 - 3) He goes on to describe earthly life as **“a mere breath”** (5; vapor or breath)
 - 4) He uses a great word picture to describe life: that of a man walking around as nothing but an image (6; translated as shadow, ghost or phantom)
 - 5) He describes life as frantically rushing around accumulating material wealth only to leave it for the next guy who comes after them (6)
- c. Why does David ask God to give him a proper perspective about the brevity of life?
- 1) Might it be that David recognized as a result of his sin (i.e. Bathsheba?), that his life could be spent pursuing God or pursuing pleasure, and a proper perspective on the brevity of life might motivate him to pursue the former?
 - 2) Paul warns us in Ephesians 5:15: **“Therefore, be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil.”**
 - 3) He then warns us to be filled with the Spirit and understand what God’s will is
2. He prays for deliverance from his transgressions (7-9):
- a. In the midst of his despair, David recognizes his only hope is the Lord: **“And now, Lord, for what do I wait? My hope is in You.”**
 - b. What is David’s hope? Deliverance from his sins (8): **“Deliver me from all my transgressions; Make me not the reproach of the foolish.”**
 - 1) Look at David’s description of the fool from Psalm 14:1-3
 - 2) Whatever David had done (i.e. the census, killing Uriah, adultery with Bathsheba) it was the behavior of a fool, one who lived life as if there was no accountability before God
 - c. David offers an admission that it is because of his own sin that God was chastising him, and it left him speechless before God (9): **“I have become mute, I do not open my mouth because it is You who have done it”**
 - 1) This admission is the beginning of confession and repentance
 - 2) See John 1:8-9
 - 3) I believe this is also one of the things that made David a man after God’s own heart (the way David handled his sin when confronted)
 - 4) See James 5:13-18, esp. 15 & 16
3. He prays for relief from God’s chastisement (10-11):
- a. Look at how David describes the Lord’s chastisement (10): “plague”, “opposition”, “perishing”:
 - a) the word for plague here actually refers to striking something
 - b) The NET translates this verse like this: **“Please stop wounding me! You have almost beaten me to death!”**
 - c) He refers to the Lord **“consuming as a moth what is precious to him”** (could this be a reference to the death of his son with Bathsheba?)
 - b. David also reveals an uncomfortable truth here about God: **“With reproofs You chasten a man for iniquity”**
 - a) We have no trouble seeing God as a loving, gracious God

- b) We have more difficulty seeing Him as a father who disciplines his sons and daughters when they do wrong
 - c) Read Hebrews 12:4-11, especially the end of verse 10 (for holiness) and verse 11 (for righteousness)
- c. While it might seem that David is blaming God here for what he is suffering, but he has already made it clear that he understands that it is a result of his own sin
 - d. Rather, David's words here should be understood as a form of total surrender, and recognition that unless the Lord did lift the discipline he would likely not survive
4. He prays for restoration (12-13):
- a. David's final imperative is a plea for God to restore him to the right relationship with God
 - b. He refers to himself as a "**stranger**" and "**sojourner**" (foreigner) before God which is diametrically opposed to his heritage as an Israelite and God's chosen leader of Israel—what damage sin has done!
 - c. His pleads with God to:
 - 1) "**give ear to my cry**"
 - 2) Not to remain "**silent at my tears**" (notice the poetic word play between David's silence and God's silence)
 - 3) To "**turn Your [angry] gaze away from me**"
 - 4) All so that he "**may smile again before I depart and am no longer**"
 - d. David's longing was actually what God longs for as well: healing of the broken relationship
 - 1) Isn't this ultimately what the Gospel is about?
 - 2) As unsaved, we were told in Romans 2:4 that it is God's kindness that leads us to repentance
 - 3) As believers we are told in John 1:9: "**HE is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.**"

Conclusion

1. The Lord disciplines those He loves when they sin: Deuteronomy 8:5: "**You should also consider in your heart, that as a father disciplines his own son, so the Lord your God disciplines you.**"
2. When David found himself under discipline because of his own sins, he still found his hope in the Lord (v. 7): "**And now, Lord, for what do I wait? My hope is in You.**"
3. And that hope was that the Lord would open his eyes, deliver him from his sins and ultimately repair the broken relationship