

Psalm 39 The Vanity of Life

by Pastor Roy Hogan

Some believe this 39th Psalm is a continuation of the 38th Psalm. As David speaks in this 39th Psalm, there is evidence he is still in a state of chastisement for sin. The 38th Psalm must surely belong aside the saddest chapters in the Bible. The consequences of sin visited upon David by the hand of God were dire and dreadful. The more one thinks about his description of how the chastisement has ravaged his physical being, the more it appears leprosy took hold of him. In the era of David, there was no cure for leprosy other than by the hand of God.

In chapter 39, he ceases to speak of his physical suffering. Instead, he looks at his inner man and reflects on his soul and spirit. He also reflects on the vanity of life.

39:1

I said, I will take heed to my ways, that I sin not with my tongue: I will keep my mouth with a bridle, while the wicked is before me.

The tongue is a great sinner, and we are all stuck with one. You may not own a gun or even a knife, but you own a tongue. Often, I have wished I could function without the dreadful tongue. It is a nemesis to every person.

Anytime we talk of the tongue, we are well advised to reference what the book of James has to say about it:

James 1:26 If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain.

James 3:1-12 My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation.2 For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole

body. 3 Behold, we put bits in the horses' mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body. 4 Behold also the ships, which though they be so great, and are driven of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm, whithersoever the governor listeth. 5 Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth! 6 And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell. 7 For every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed, and hath been tamed of mankind: 8 But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. 9 Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God. 10 Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be. 11 Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter? 12 Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries? either a vine, figs? so can no fountain both yield salt water and fresh.

James 3:6 tells us the tongue is a fire *set on fire of hell*. Really, I am insulted. I am mad. Brother James just knocked me out of my chair. Brother James also said in verse 7 our chance of taming a snake are greater than our chance of taming the tongue. Now, I am really mad.

There is great concern in America regarding guns. Yet, more people have been killed with a tongue than with a firearm. I have firearms, as do most men in the south. I keep the firearms in a safe place. Some are in a locked safe. How I wish someone made a safe for tongues.

Fire destroys billions of dollars' worth of property each year around the world. Matches are dangerous. Fire can destroy. Yet, things that the tongue have destroyed far exceed the damage done by the fire of a match and gasoline.

The tongue is a dreadful sinner. Please pray for my tongue, and I will pray for yours.

In the previous Psalm 38, David, in the midst of his physical suffering, was also assailed by his enemies. How cruel is an enemy that attacks while one lying on the bed of affliction? Enemies can be very cruel. Surprisingly, David is concerned about what he will say to his enemies. What will his tongue bring forth? In this verse 1, he requests God place a bridle on his tongue while in the enemy's presence. This is good advice. When we are sick and when we are bothered by an enemy, we are likely to speak dangerous and harmful things. David felt it was best to just be silent in their midst. One word spoken out of place has gotten men killed. We sometime say regarding an enemy "I am going to give them a piece of my mind." You may, in turn, get a piece of their fist. The best policy may be to remain silent.

39:2

I was dumb with silence, I held my peace, even from good; and my sorrow was stirred.

Dumb mean "to be tongue-tied." David even stopped speaking of good things. This is not what God meant for him. In his dire and disgusting state, he essentially stopped talking. He went overboard. There is never a time or circumstance that should stop us from, at a minimum, speaking good things to and about our good LORD.

39:3

My heart was hot within me, while I was musing the fire burned: then spake I with my tongue,

David could not remain silent. David burned inside. The longer he kept silent, the hotter he got on the inside. His silence set his heart on fire. A volcano erupted. The cap blew off.

39:4

3

LORD, make me to know mine end, and the measure of my days, what it is; *that* I may know how frail I *am*.

David had two questions: he wanted to know the manner of his death and when death would come. These two questions likely come into the mind of most folk as they begin to look toward the end of life's journey. My father, Pastor G. D. Hogan, was a simple but wise man. He put this verse in everyday language and easy to understand as follows: something is going to take you out of this world, and you never know what condition you may be in before you leave. How true this is. What will be my end? Will cancer take me out? Will I die in my sleep of heart failure? Will I lie on the bed of affliction with multiple diseases for months, even years?

David determined that if he could know what would take his life and when it would happen, he could gauge his *frailty*. All men are frail. Yes, you and I and my family members and my brothers and sisters in Christ are going to die. We may not all go to Disney World, but we are all going to the cemetery. The only unknowns are what will take us there, and when will we arrive.

39:5

Behold, thou hast made my days as an handbreadth; and mine age is as nothing before thee: verily every man at his best state is altogether vanity. Selah

My days are as an handbreadth. Commonly, a handbreadth is the width across the palm of an ordinary man. Thus, it is the width of four fingers. In times gone by, handbreadth was the measure of the height of a horse or mule. In some regions of the world, the handbreadth was standardized as being 4 inches. Four inches is not very far, and neither is life's journey very far. I wonder if I am at 3 ½"? Maybe I am at 3 ¾". We have no way of knowing when life will end. Job advised us in Job 14:1 *Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble.*

Mine age is nothing for thee. Four inches is a small distance for man. I cannot imagine how small 4 inches is to God. He measured the seas in the palm of his hand. He hung the heavens as one would hang a curtain. The Milky Way galaxy in which our solar system sits is 600,000,000,000,000,000 (6 with seventeen zeroes) miles across. Four inches is very small to God. The usual length of a life is spoken of in the Bible as fourscore and seventy, that is, 70 years. A man may boast to be 100 years-old. If so, he made it 5 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches. God saw fit to lengthen his life beyond 4 inches.

Verily every man at his best state is altogether vanity. The final of the three great truths in this single verse is very profound. I do not know what would be considered *best state*. Would it be that a man drove a Rolls-Royce, wore a fine imported suit, and had a million dollars in the bank? Solomon had more riches than any man, and had more women than any man, and it drove him crazy. He wrote a lot about vanity in the book of Ecclesiastes. One can put lipstick on a pig, and it is still an ugly pig. There is not remedy in this life, aside from the Holy Spirit, that can remove the vain streak from a human being. Go to the market and look at the vanity of human being. It stinks.

39:6

Surely every man walketh in a vain show: surely they are disquieted in vain: he heapeth up riches, and knoweth not who shall gather them.

Some feel they are Mr. Big or Mrs. Big. David amassed a great fortune. He gathered untold riches for the construction of the temple. He earmarked this accumulation of riches that great building. He made this clear to his son Solomon in his last days on earth.

David was also wealthy as an individual. This we are told in I Chronicles 29:28 *And he died in a good old age, full of days, riches, and honour: and Solomon his son reigned in his stead.* His riches did not matter when he was placed in a coffin. The curtain

of life was drawn shut, and the vain show had ended. Death is stubborn. Death is empty. Death makes a fool of all men. Death makes sure God is in control and not vain man. We work our fingers to the bone. We make ourselves servants of our employer. We comb our hair. We powder our face. Then, we die. Life is vain.

A man dying of thirst in the desert got a glimpse of a pool of water in the far distance. With the little energy he had remaining, he proceeded to the pool. Suddenly, as he closed in on the water, that is, his hope of life, the water disappeared. It was a delusion. He fell face first to his death. A man once said “we are born naked and are buried in half a suit.” Such is the vanity of this matter called life.

Who is going to gather up your *riches*? I know folk who are heaping them up, as this verse states. Who will get the Pile? The deceased will never know. Likely, some law firm your children have hired to settle their dispute over what you left. Be sure you leave all you can so that your children will have something to fight over. There is nothing like money to change people and to make brothers and sisters hate one another.

39:7-8

And now, Lord, what wait I for? my hope is in thee. 8 Deliver me from all my transgressions: make me not the reproach of the foolish.

I Corinthians 15:19 *If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable.* It is wonderful to live a life with Christ as a friend. However, if death is the end, living a life with Christ has little meaning considering the vanity and brevity of life. There must be hope beyond life. I am glad we have the promise that this pitiful life filled with pain and disappointment is not the end. It is only the dressing room. This life is where we get clothed for that glory world that awaits after death.

39:9

I was dumb, I opened not my mouth; because thou didst it.

A child of God, like David, knows when the father rebukes him. He knew God was punishing him for his sin. He thus saw no reason to argue with God. He made no excuses. Have you ever met even one believer who honestly told you they were being punished by Father God because they had sinned? Thank God for David's honesty.

39:10-11

Remove thy stroke away from me: I am consumed by the blow of thine hand. 11 When thou with rebukes dost correct man for iniquity, thou makest his beauty to consume away like a moth: surely every man is vanity. Selah

God knocked David out with his hand. It was not a slap on the wrist. The blow God gave David was severe.

Consider the damage a moth can do to a fine garment. A moth can turn the most beautiful garment to an undesirable garment unfit to wear. Sin is a moth. Sin ate a hole in David. The hole left a scar. David never looked the same when God finished with him.

With this verse, I am even more convinced that David had leprosy. Leprosy leaves its mark as a moth does to a garment.

39:12

Hear my prayer, O LORD, and give ear unto my cry; hold not thy peace at my tears: for I am a stranger with thee, and a sojourner, as all my fathers were.

I believe the deepest of all signs of remorse is tears. In sorrow, we sometimes pray silently and sometimes we may moan aloud, but when tears flow, we express the deepest regret and sorrow. David cried. He requested that God consider that he was deeply sorrowful for his sin.

39:13

O spare me, that I may recover strength, before I go hence, and be no more.

Said David, and I paraphrase, “Dear God, if you don’t help me, I am going to die.”

Sin, and the consequences of sin, are awful.