

Psalm 39

Perplexed, but not Driven to Despair

1. Background and theme

The title links the Psalm with Psalm 62. Both Psalms: compare man to mere breath; confess David's hope in God; like to use the exclamation "surely".

David's confession that he is a stranger and a sojourner (v. 13) is a link to David's last prayer before his death (1 Chron. 29:15). "The principle element in the background...appears to be the reflective consciousness of old age... It is primarily the awareness of the nearness and inevitability of death that provokes the lament and prayer" (Craigie).

"The burning question of this psalm is why God should so assiduously discipline a creature as frail and fleeting as man. It is an outburst like that of Job 7, and especially the cry there, 'Let me alone, for my days are a breath. What is man that thou dost make so much of him?' (Jb. 7:16b, 17a). But the question...is not asked in arrogance but with touching loyalty (1) and a submissive faith (7)" (Kidner).

"We noticed the family resemblance between Psalm 37 and Proverbs, and that between Psalm 38 and Job. We are still among the wisdom books; Psalm 39 is the Ecclesiastes of the group. Three times the word which dominates that book figures in this psalm – *hebel*, 'vanity' or 'meaninglessness'" (Wilcock).

2. Structure

The Psalm has a "pendulum" structure.

A¹ (vv. 1-3) *Frustrated silence: David won't speak in the presence of the wicked*

B¹ (vv. 4-6) *Plaintive speech: David is perplexed by life's brevity*

A² (vv. 7-11) *Submissive silence: David has focused on God and God's actions*

B² (vv. 12-13) *Tearful speech: in view of life's brevity, David asks for respite*

3. Helpful comments

(a) *Frustrated silence* (vv. 1-3)

There was something David was longing to say, but he would not say it in the presence of unbelievers. "Whatever the burden on his heart may be, the attitude of the psalmist's mind is an admirable one. He has faith; he has questions; and he has loyalty" (Wilcock).

"To have faith does not mean you have no more questions. To have questions does not mean your faith has failed. It is childish to imagine that a tide moving one way will never be accompanied by waves moving the other way" (Wilcock).

(b) *Plaintive speech* (vv. 4-6)

"More than likely the suppliant is asking not for information but for the willingness to live with the facts, for the grace to acknowledge and accept the nature of human life" (Goldingay).

"The very ability to articulate a question about the transitory nature of human life betrays an insight that was lacking in wicked persons" (Craigie).

"This seems to be a deliberate act of facing unwelcome facts as God's facts, and seeing them as He sees them (*in thy sight*, 5)" (Kidner).

The handbreadth is the short Hebrew measure (4 inches). "[The LORD] has given the suppliant a life that is measurable on that scale. It is just a few inches long... the brevity of human life makes it unimpressive to [the LORD]... Even human beings who stand firm, people in good health who look destined to live a long life...are quite evanescent and might die at any moment" (Goldingay).

(c) *Submissive silence* (vv. 7-11)

"This time, it is not self-imposed restraint to stop himself from speaking sinful words, but the silence of perception" (Craigie).

"It is just this which is so heroic in the Old Testament faith, that in the midst of the riddles of the present, and in the face of the future which is lost in dismal night, it casts itself unreservedly into the arms of God" (Delitzsch).

"One needs a paradigm shift, focusing on 'Who?' instead of 'What?'... Instead of looking for *something*, the suppliant hopes in *someone*. The brevity of human life does not lead to a determination to enjoy it while we can; it leads the suppliant to 'God and nothing but God'" (Goldingay).

"While the burden of [Psalm 38] was the cruelty of friends and enemies, here it is the crushing severity of God... What troubles David is the heavy-handed treatment of so ephemeral and vulnerable offender as man (10f.); for he is looking beyond his particular case. This is the paradox that troubled Job..., and like most paradoxes it concealed unexplored wealth...: in this case the fact that man is made for sonship and for eternity" (Kidner).

(d) *Tearful speech* (vv. 12-13)

"It is a Rabbinic saying that there are three kinds of supplication, each superior to the other; prayer, crying and tears. Prayer is made in silence, crying with a loud voice, but tears surpass all. 'There is no door through which tears do not pass,' and, 'The gates of tears are never locked'" (Kirkpatrick quoted by Goldingay).

For the language of "aliens and strangers" in the NT see Eph. 2:19; Heb. 11:13-16; 1 Pet. 2:11. "The very concept of the alien and the stranger held within itself another of the Old Testament pointers to the New Testament hope of heaven. The fact of all these people having no real home here implied that in the mind of their loving Lord they would eventually have a proper home somewhere better. Tents for the present, one day a city, says Hebrews 11:9-10" (Wilcock).

"The only way to the resurrection is via Gethsemane; Ps. 39 is a prayer Jesus might have prayed there, and one that believers on the way to resurrection still pray" (Goldingay).

"...for the moment, like Job or Jeremiah, he can see no more than death, and ask no more than respite... The very presence of such prayers in Scripture is a witness to [God's] understanding. He knows how men speak when they are desperate" (Kidner).