

Psalm 39

Introduction – This Psalm and its subject are a gift, but it does not sing like a gift. If it is true that God has placed eternity in our hearts (Eccles 3:11), if there is something immortal about us, if life is supposed to matter somehow and we are honest with ourselves about our fleeting lives, God needs to clear some things up. Some men ignore these issues. Some let these questions drive them to despair. But those to whom God gives the gift, find wisdom, satisfaction, and blessing. *"The burning question of this psalm is why God should so assiduously discipline a creature as frail and fleeting as man"* – D. Kidner.

Pent-up Protest and Loyalty (vv1-3) – The Psalm-singer is deeply troubled with questions and complaints before God and yet even so he is careful not to forget the antithesis. The unbeliever has the same questions but uses them to deny the existence or omnipotence of God; the Psalm-singer's feelings were hot enough to be taken for disloyalty in such company. He shows his responsible loyalty for God's good name in his self-restraint. His silence around the wicked only gets him pent up with his protests (v3) and so he does find the appropriate place and time to openly and honestly lay it all out before God. If it has you worked up and agitated, God wants you to ask Him about it. He is not aghast at what you bring before Him; He already knows your complaints. James teaches us that in the midst of affliction, God wants us to seek His wisdom (James 1:2-7).

This Fleeting Life (vv4-6) – Even as he brings his complaint, the Psalm-singer formulates his question as a learner (v4). The question that is first bothering him is this: what is the purpose and meaning of this frail, short, messed up life that You give us? No matter how long I live, life is still "poof" – a vapor (v5, James 4:14). *Selah* – I need to meditate on this. David's son did this and recorded it for us in the book of Ecclesiastes, a book of wisdom and not despair. But that wisdom did not come without a profound recognition of the vapor-mist of this life (Eccles 2:11, 6:12). Unless God gives the gift of enjoyment in the earthly things of this life, they cannot truly be enjoyed. This includes every man "at his best state" with all of his achievements, every man in his "busy uproar over nothing" with all of his knowledge, every man in all of his deepest troubles and at his greatest place of wealth. The whole thing just blows away in a very short time like a smoke ring.

Then Why Bother with Us? (vv7-11) – Verse 7 is central to the Psalm; it is the answer and the summary cry of the Psalm-singer and so we will come back to it. His second big question/complaint builds from the first: if we are just a bunch of smoke, why does God keep thrashing the smoke? Why does He not just leave us alone? Left in his sin, he will be nothing but the reproach of fools (v8). He was mute because he knew it was God who had brought the afflictions, hoping for the good reasons but unable to see them, he had no way to defend God's purposes (v9). He prays to be delivered from the hard hand of God especially as he sees how brief any fruit from such discipline will last (vv10-11). This sounds similar to Job's question, "why bother?" (Job 7:17-21).

Please Know My Frame (vv12-13) – In his questions, the Psalm-singer calls on God to answer him (he expects it as if he knows the character of God). He reminds God that he is not at home in this world, in its fallenness, its afflictions, and its death. Interestingly, David used the same language when he was blessed beyond measure (1 Chron 29:15). Finally though, he begs a reprieve from the hand of God, that he might regain strength and his senses and with the wisdom he seeks, live out his life before he goes away and is no more on this earth (v13). He wants to live his life following God with satisfaction and rest.

Wisdom and Hope as Pilgrims - Here is the foundation of wisdom; it begins with loyalty or what might be called "the fear of God." It is not that we are to deny what we receive in this life as though it were not from the hand of God – and refuse to give thanks in all things. It is not that we are to deny the material nor our physical experience here as insignificant and instead only pursue the great thoughts of the ethereal heavens. It is that we must acknowledge that there is no satisfaction in life apart from the gift of God. If we deny the gift or the need for the gift, we will end in despair or, trying to avoid that, we will party at the edge of the cliff as long as we can – *"if the dead do not rise, let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die"* (1 Cor 15:32). But the dead do rise, and we have the story of Jesus to prove it. We have the story of the One who was tempted in all ways as a human and yet was without sin. We have the story of the One who suffered even unto a shameful death on the cross, ripped apart in body and in soul cast away from the good Presence of His Father. We have the story of the One who was buried in the grave cold and dead - and yet that grave could not keep Him. In the "dark night of the soul" we are invited to turn to this One and find that He is the Answer (Heb 2:10-13). The Psalm-singer wanted life, wanted meaning, wanted satisfaction, wanted answers, wanted this fleeting life to make sense. Do you? He found it, waiting for the hope he knew God would give (v7). God has revealed far more of that hope for us in this age of the Gospel.