

Psalm 39      “A Song from the Mute Shadows”  
Psalm 38/39  
Luke 1:57-80

December 18, 2016

When I first started planning this Psalm series,  
I looked at Advent and wondered how to make this work.  
The Psalms in the late 30s are so dark!  
But that’s when I realized that *Advent* is a dark season.  
Our commercial culture tries to make it a happy season,  
but if we take seriously the *joy* of Christmas,  
then Advent is a reminder of a world without Jesus.

Think about that for a moment.  
A world without Jesus?  
That’s what these Psalms are talking about.  
What is the purpose of a life without Jesus?  
If the Word does not become flesh and dwell among us  
then what future do we have?

Since I already preached on Psalm 38 a few years ago,  
we will skip over it this time –  
but we will sing it –  
because Psalm 38 is essential to the ending of Book One of the Psalter.

Psalm 38 is often categorized as an “individual lament” of someone who is deathly ill.  
And yet the title of Psalm 38 is:  
“A Psalm of David, for the Memorial Offering.”  
The memorial offering is the portion of the grain offering that is burned in the fire.  
It is called the memorial offering  
because it is asking God to *remember* us.  
The rest of the grain offering is given to the priests for their families.

And yet the whole of Psalm 38 is an individual lament over my sickness,  
over my grief because of my sin,  
and over my misery and despair.

Yes, it is entirely appropriate for you to sing Psalm 38 in times of sickness and trouble –  
especially when you are lamenting over your sin,  
and the misery that follows from sin.  
But Psalm 38 is also given to us for us to sing together –  
because we *all* come together before the throne of grace  
recognizing that we are poor and miserable sinners,  
this is our condition as part of the human race.

Apart from Christ, we are in an estate of sin and misery!  
(We have inherited this condition from our fathers).  
And that's why Psalm 38 is such a great song for Advent.  
"For you, O LORD, do I wait; it is you, O Lord my God, who will answer."

Sing Psalm 38  
Read Luke 1:57-80

Zechariah was unable to speak until the day of John's birth.  
It is fitting that Psalm 39 is a song from the mute shadows.

Psalm 39 goes on to say,  
"I am mute; I do not open my mouth, for it is you who have done it."  
I am afflicted and in trouble – because of *your stroke*.

Both for Zechariah and for the Psalmist,  
God is the one who has put me in this situation (and at least in part) due to my sin.

Sometimes God puts you in a situation where you have nothing to say –  
indeed, where you should say nothing.

Sometimes we think that because the Word became flesh,  
therefore *speaking* is the solution to everything!

Yes, the *Word* is the solution to everything –  
but that does not mean that *speaking* is the solution to everything.  
Because the *Word* became *flesh*.  
As my father taught me, very often the solution is found in a hug.  
A look – a smile – a hug –  
these are all ways in which the *Word* is expressed bodily.

So if you would know how to endure in the midst of trials and troubles,  
then learn how to sing Psalm 39.

*To the choirmaster: to Jeduthun. A Psalm of David.*

You will notice a new name in the title: Jeduthun.  
Jeduthun was a music master in time of David.  
Psalms 39, 62, and 77 all name Jeduthun –  
which may indicate that he was the author of these poems –  
or it could indicate a particular style or method of composition.

Psalm 39 follows closely on the themes of Psalm 38 that we just sang.

One of features of this song is the frequent repetition of the possessive pronoun “my.”

My ways – my tongue – my mouth – my presence (v1)

My peace, my distress (v2)

My heart, my tongue (v3)

This is fairly common in laments – because the lament is focusing on *my* situation.

One effect of this is that the whole Psalm is very *me-centered*.

Even as the prayer starts in verses 4-5,

the language of “my end...my days...my lifetime” continues.

Only in verse 6 does it open up to all humanity –

and then as the focus shifts to God,

notice how the “me-focus” continues:

v7 – my hope, my transgressions, my mouth...

v12 – my prayer, my tears, my fathers...

Because this is my problem:

even though I can see my sin – and I can certainly see my misery –

I cannot escape *me*.

I am stuck in a me-centered universe.

And my only hope is *you*.

## **1. Silence: When Holding My Peace Is Not an Option (v1-3)**

### **a. Guarding My Ways and My Tongue (v1)**

*39 I said, “I will guard my ways,  
that I may not sin with my tongue;  
I will guard my mouth with a muzzle,  
so long as the wicked are in my presence.”*

Verse 1 sets an honorable starting point.

“I will guard my ways, that I may not sin with my tongue.”

The Psalmist recognizes that the tongue is a fire – a world of evil –

that sets ablaze the whole body (to use the language of James).

It is *so easy* to sin with your tongue.

It is so easy to make a wasteland of your relationships through what you say.

And particularly when you are in the wrong company:

“I will guard my mouth with a muzzle, so long as the wicked are in my presence.”

You *know* that they will misconstrue whatever you say.

They will twist your words to the harm of many.

So don’t give them anything to work with!

I once made the mistake of being very open and forthright with a wicked person.

(Oh, how I wish that it was only once – but I’m just talking about that one time!)  
That man used my words to harm others greatly.  
It took months to rebuild the relationships that he tried to destroy.

We should be open and forthright people.

We should be *truth-tellers*.

But when you are dealing with those whom you *know* to be wicked –  
manipulative, abusive people who are trying to destroy others –  
guard your mouth with a muzzle!

Anything you say can and will be used against you!

But here’s the problem:

You can’t stay quiet forever!

As verse 4 will tell us, the *topic* is that of suffering.

The temptation is to blame God for my suffering.

When life is hard, it can be easy to blame God.

And particularly in verses 2-3, we see how the Psalmist’s distress only got worse:

### **b. My Distress Provoked Me to Speak with My Tongue (v2-3)**

<sup>2</sup> *I was mute and silent;*

*I held my peace to no avail,  
and my distress grew worse.*

<sup>3</sup> *My heart became hot within me.*

*As I mused, the fire burned;  
then I spoke with my tongue:*

“My heart growing hot” (Craigie, 309) refers to the anger of an uncontrollable man,  
one who is deeply grieved at the misery of this life.

There are definite echoes of the book of Job here.

After seven days of sitting in silence with his friends,  
Job finally spoke.

And verses 4-6 reflect very much on the sorts of themes that Job does.

## **2. Shadows: The Futility of Human Life (v4-6)**

### **a. My End Is Near (v4-5a)**

<sup>4</sup> *“O LORD, make me know my end  
and what is the measure of my days;  
let me know how fleeting I am!*

<sup>5</sup> *Behold, you have made my days a few handbreadths,  
and my lifetime is as nothing before you.*

You may notice a somewhat curious train of thought here:

In verse 4, the Psalmist asks God to instruct him regarding the transience of life –  
and then in verses 5-6, the Psalmist seems to complain about the transience of life.  
I want to understand the truth about how fleeting I am –  
and yet, because I am so fleeting, I do not much time to learn it!  
So if you take too long in teaching me, I may never get there!

And this is not just a problem for me – this is true for everyone!

**b. And This Is True for Everyone (v5b-6)**

*Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath! Selah*

The word translated “breath” is the Hebrew word *hebel* – which means “vapor” –  
the word translated “vanity” in Ecclesiastes –  
(also the *name* of Abel in Genesis).  
Think of the story of Cain and Abel.  
Abel had offered a better sacrifice – and God accepted Abel’s sacrifice.  
His brother, Cain, was jealous  
So what did Cain do?

He killed his brother.

Abel’s life was *hebel* – a vapor – a mere breath.  
But now Psalm 39 says that all mankind (all Adam) stands as a mere breath (an Abel).  
Just like in the story of Genesis,  
the story of humanity is that Adam becomes Abel.  
Everyone dies –  
and not just “dies” – but dies a miserable death.

<sup>6</sup> *Surely a man goes about as a shadow!  
Surely for nothing<sup>al</sup> they are in turmoil;  
man heaps up wealth and does not know who will gather!*

And that same word “hebel” comes back in verse 6.  
Surely for vapor – for hebel – they are in turmoil.  
Man heaps up wealth and does not know who will gather!

Oh, you may *think* that you are heaping up wealth for your children –  
but you do not know the future.

When I lived on Sunnyside, we had a book that showed the title history of our property –  
not just back to the 1920s – when the house was built –  
but all the way back to the 1800s – when it was farmland.

And as I looked at the first entry in the book,  
I couldn't help but wonder –  
who used that land before then?  
Probably Potawatomi Indians who were hunting and fishing by the St. Joe River –  
or the Sakiwasipi – as they called it.

Surely for nothing – for *hebel* – for vapor – they are in turmoil;  
man heaps up wealth and does not know who will gather.

Life is short.

And then you die.

My life is but a few handbreadths long.

The Genesis imagery continues, though, in this verse.

When it says “surely a man goes about as a shadow”  
the word man is the word “ish” (the word used for “male” in Genesis 1),  
and the word “shadow” is actually the word translated “image” in Genesis 1.  
Surely a man walks about as an image.

Certainly a shadow is an image –  
but given the language of adam and abel in this context,  
it is not accidental that we are talking about man as *image*.

But the image here is a darkened and clouded image – truly, a *shadow* of his former self.  
Rather than being fruitful and multiplying, filling the earth and having dominion,  
man is in turmoil – an uproar – murmuring about *hebel* –  
murmuring about vanity and vapor.

They raise a fuss about nothing.

What is all the fuss about?

Vapor.

What are you striving for?

And this is the turning point in verse 7:

### **3. Discipline: My Hope Is in the One Who Has Afflicted Me (v7-11)**

#### **a. My Hope: You (v7)**

<sup>7</sup> “And now, O Lord, for what do I wait?”

*My hope is in you.*

In verses 7-11, we see 1) my hope, 2) my transgressions, 3) my mouth –  
and then *your hand* and *your discipline*.

My hope is in you.

How are you going to get out of this mess?

My hope is in you.

Wait, I know – I've got a great idea!

My hope is in you.

If I just do this – and try that – if I only just say this...

My hope is in you.

When will that get through your thick skull?  
(When will it get through mine?)

My hope is in you.

I can't fix this.

That's why verse 8 is so important to the song:

**b. My Transgressions (v8)**

<sup>8</sup> *Deliver me from all my transgressions.*

*Do not make me the scorn of the fool!*

The central part of my problem *is me*.

Sure, there are others out there – the scorn of the fool is very real! – and I don't like it! –  
but if you deliver me from all my transgressions,  
then I can endure anything.

As you approach Christmas this week –  
as you approach all the challenging situations with family and friends and work –  
remember that at the center of Christmas  
is the *Christ* who delivered us from our sin.

My hope is in *him*.

And so

**c. My Mouth: Mute (v9)**

<sup>9</sup> *I am mute; I do not open my mouth,*

*for it is you who have done it.*

Why am I silent?

Because *you* have done this.  
You have acted.  
My situation – this *really hard place* where I am right now –  
is *your* doing.

You, my God, who tenderly loves your own –  
you have laid upon me this suffering –  
and if you have done it, then it must be designed not for my destruction,  
but for my salvation. (Hengstenberg, II, 60-61)  
And therefore, I wait patiently for my God.

Patiently – yes.  
But silence does not mean that I say nothing!  
Even in my silence, I still speak to God!

Think of Zechariah – the father of John – whose silence was imposed by God.  
He may have mute before man,  
but he undoubtedly poured out his soul to God!

**d. *Your Hand: What Has Done This* (v10)**

<sup>10</sup> *Remove your stroke from me;  
I am spent by the hostility of your hand.*

There are some who would say that good things come from God – and bad things from the devil.  
But the Psalmist understands that even the *bad things* come from the hand of God.  
And there are times when God's hand is *against* us –  
when God is hostile – not in the sense of seeking to *destroy* his children –  
but in our experience that God is against us!

And *yes*, there *are* times when God is against us!

When you are going the wrong direction – God is against you!  
Of course, the story of Job (and the story of Jesus!)  
makes clear that misery and suffering is not always directly because of *your* sin  
(if so, then Jesus could not have suffered!).  
But the point of Psalm 39 is that *this particular suffering* is because of your sin:

**e. *Your Discipline* (v11)**

<sup>11</sup> *When you discipline a man  
with rebukes for sin,  
you consume like a moth what is dear to him;  
surely all mankind is a mere breath! Selah*



Let me say this really simply:

When you make something more dear to you than God,  
then God gets hostile.

The LORD our God is a jealous God.

Jealousy is a *good thing*.

If you start hitting on my wife, I will get jealous.

And that's a good thing.

I *should be* jealous for my wife.

If your wife is flirting with all the guys – going out on dates with other men –  
and you are not jealous – then there is something *very wrong* with you!

Well, when some created thing is more dear to you than the one who made it,  
then God gets jealous.

God gets hostile.

And the next thing you know, that thing – that created thing –  
that thing that you love more than God –

will be consumed – like a moth consumes woolen cloth.

One commentator says it well:

Verse 12 should “remind us of the moth about which Jesus made a pointed remark.

In the same breath He also referred to the remorseless corrosion effected by rust.

Only if we take this in utter seriousness

shall we have a cure against the desperate urge of  
“catching up with the Joneses”

and against other urges that tear us apart...

Only the view of eternal life, stressed in the Gospels

can resolve the agony that prompted Augustine to conclude:

‘Restless is our soul until it finds its rest in you, O Lord’” (Jaki p. 91).

Surely all mankind is a mere breath!

Surely every Adam is but an Abel.

Nothing has really changed since that first generation.

Sin, misery, and death – vapor and vanity – is what characterizes humanity.

#### **4. Prayer: The Cry of the Sojourner (v12-13)**

And that is where the cry of sojourner in verse 12 must be heard:

##### **a. Hold Not Your Peace at My Tears (v12)**

<sup>12</sup> “*Hear my prayer, O LORD,*

*and give ear to my cry;*

*hold not your peace at my tears!*

Don't be okay with my suffering!  
You see my affliction.  
What are you going to do about it?

When you see someone in tears – it should move you.  
Last night as the emcee wept over her daughter's performance at Greater Mt Calvary,  
many were moved to tears as well.  
And if *we* are moved by the tears of others,  
how much more the Lord God who created them!

Hold not your peace at my tears!  
And truly, God has promised that he will wipe away every tear from their eyes.  
God will remember your tears!

But notice again – and again –  
how the Psalmist always brings his frustrations and complaints to God *in faith*:

*For I am a sojourner with you,  
a guest, like all my fathers.*

Truly, I have not found such faith in all Israel.  
Jesus said that of a Gentile.  
But it applies equally to the Psalmist!

“I am a sojourner”?  
If anyone could claim to be at *home* with God,  
it would be David.  
After all, God *promised* Israel the *land*.  
Israelites prided themselves on their *inheritance* in the land!  
Sojourners were outsiders – foreigners.  
But *we* are God's chosen people!

But David says,  
“I am a sojourner with you, a guest, like all my fathers.”  
Never forget that you were *once* darkness.  
You were strangers – aliens – foreigners.

*Even the Jews!  
Even David!*

That is why the word became flesh and *dwelt among us*.  
Only when the Word sojourned with us

could we become children of God.  
Only when the eternal Son of God joined himself to our nature  
could our nature become partakers of the divine nature!

And so the Psalmist cries out to God:

**b. Stop Looking at Me (v13)**

<sup>13</sup> *Look away from me, that I may smile again,  
before I depart and am no more!*

Stop looking at me!

Normally we expect to hear the Psalmist ask for the eyes of the LORD to be upon him –  
“Look upon me in my distress” –  
because when God sees me in the midst of my trouble,  
he will take pity on me and rescue me.  
But here the Psalmist says “look away from me, that I may smile again...”

Stop looking at me.

Your gaze pierces me to my soul!  
Your holy eyes that are too pure to look upon sin –  
and therefore you are chastening me and correcting me  
and purifying me –  
and I just can't take it anymore!!

Please look away from me – that I may smile again before I die!

I well remember the overwhelming sense of God's holiness  
that nearly crushed me.

It's okay to say to God,  
“God, I can't take it anymore!”  
So long you keep saying “my hope is in you.”

In Luke 5:8, we hear Simon Peter say, “Lord, depart from me, for I am a sinful man.”

As Derek Kidner points out,

“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). . .  
This rootlessness David sees as his own and everyman's condition. . .  
Yet for the moment, like Job or Jeremiah,

he can see no more than death,  
and ask no more than respite.  
The prayer of 13a makes no more sense than Peter's 'depart from me';  
but God knows when to treat that plea as in Luke 5:8ff..  
The very presence of such prayers in Scripture is a witness to His understanding.  
He knows how men speak when they are desperate" (pp. 155-57).

In your desperation – in your times of trouble and affliction –  
call out to him –  
pour out your soul to him!

He made you – he knows how you work.

And what is more – indeed, what is beyond our comprehension, is that –  
He came in your flesh –  
He came in your weakness.  
He bore all our infirmities and carried all our sorrows.

He did not content himself with knowing *about* our weaknesses and our afflictions.  
He endured them himself when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.