

A Prayer in Preparation for Death

Psalm 39

Studies in the Psalms #41

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PSALM 39 says something that is so rare for us to hear but it's something that is so helpful for us. We need to prepare for death while we are living. As yourself when the last time was that you thought about death? "But that sounds so morbid?" It might for people like us who live in a culture that seeks to avoid death at all costs. We're constantly seeking cures for disease, we spend billions of dollars on makeup, plastic surgery, miracle wrinkle creams, and the list goes on. And then when a loved one dies the trend is to avoid death again by turning a time of mourning into a "celebration of life."

Do you realize how central death is to our faith? We have eternal life because Jesus Christ "was crucified, dead, and buried." And after this life we hope with certainty in "resurrection of the body and the life everlasting." We've got to think more of death honestly and biblically.

Here in Psalm 39 David continues from Psalm 38 to lament "in the valley of the shadow of death." He's confessed that his suffering was because of his sins, but now he says his sins have also taught him the brevity of life.

And what is so fascinating is that this is a Psalm meant for public meditation as it was addressed **to the choirmaster** named **Jeduthun**. We need to speak of death in the assembly of the saints with the Lord present with us by his Word. Amen? As an aside, **Jeduthun** was one of three worship leaders along with Asaph and Heman that David appointed in 1 Chronicles 16 and 25. If you go back and listen to my sermon on Psalm 33 and music in the church, these are the men I mentioned who played cymbals, harps, lyres, and trumpets at the Davidic tent on Mount Zion while sacrifices were offered at Mosaic tabernacle in a different location at Gibeon. And this is one of the reason musical instruments are appropriate in public worship because they were not part of the types and shadows of the sacrifices; they were given to praise God apart from sacrifices.

His Silence (vv. 1–3)

As David prepared for death he was *silent* as verses 1–3 say. **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”** (v. 1).

He’s saying that as a child of God under discipline for his sin, he did not want to cast his pearls before swine and be an offense or occasion for the unbeliever to mock God. But most importantly he’s saying that our main

motivation in such circumstances is reverence for God's himself in not wanting to sin. So there are times when we feel the heaviness of God the Father's discipline and therefore it is appropriate to bite our tongue and not go on Facebook and rant.

But in David's case he says not only that **I was mute and silent** but that **I held my peace to no avail, and my distress grew worse. My heart became hot within me. As I mused, the fire burned** (vv. 2–3). His reverent silence caused him to reach a boiling point! Silence ended; speech began. Think of Jesus, brothers and sisters. At a certain point, Jesus could have called down legions of angels to wipe out his enemies, but he stopped speaking to his accusers. Why? Because he was ordained to be a sacrifice for our sins and be like a sheep before it's shearers is silent (Isa. 53:7). Jesus' self-sacrifice was for your salvation and sanctification.

His Supplication (vv. 4–13)

Children, have you ever seen a pot of boiling water with some food cooking inside left on the stove a little too long? What happens? It starts to boil over. That's how David felt. He was like a pot about to boil over. At the end of verse 3 says **then I spoke with my tongue** (v. 3) and in verses 4–13 we read *his supplication*, which is a fancy word for prayer.

So children, again, maybe you've felt this way before too. And what usually comes out of your mouth? Yelling, screaming, even anger. And because of how David is describing it we expect him to vent in total anger! But what's remarkable is that instead, David transitions from silence to supplication by going to the Lord in humility and respect to ask for several things. What a beautiful prophetic picture of our Lord Jesus Christ in his active and passive obedience for us!

What does David pray and how does it help us, too, in preparing for death?

*First, pray that the Lord would give you wisdom in knowing the brevity of life. **O LORD, make me know my end and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting I am!*** (v. 4) This is not a prayer for a secret revelation just between you and God that you would know the actual date of your death, but a prayer that you would become more aware of how short your life really is. Listen to how David expresses the shortness of his life in comparison to God's eternity: **behold, you have made my days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing before you.** If you were to measure your life on a number line it would only be as long as you could stretch out your hands on that line. But that's nothing to God! And so he

says again, **surely all mankind stands as a mere breath! Surely a man goes about as a shadow! Surely for nothing they are in turmoil; man heaps up wealth and does not know who will gather!** That word **breath** (*hebel*) may be familiar to you if you've been reading your Old Testament recently: "Vanity of vanities; all is vanity" (Ecc. 1:2).

But why pray like this? David doesn't lament his sin, his suffering, and the brevity of his life in a "woe is me" kind of way. He's lamenting this fleeting life and his frailty because to do so is to come to know the Lord's eternity and ability to heal and save! And so *second, pray to the Lord in complete trust. And now, O Lord, for what do I wait? My hope is in you* (v. 7). Accept and acknowledge today that you are a sinner and that the Lord the Lord is in control of your life and your death because he is God. This is the first question and answer of our Catechism, children: "What is your only comfort in life and in death?" Jesus Christ is my comfort, amen? And the second question asks us what we need to know to live and die in the joy of this comfort? The answer is to know I am a sinner but that God is an even greater Savior and therefore I am to serve him in life and in death.

I want you to see, though, that while we are to prepare ourselves to die well in faith, this doesn't mean we lose hope in this life. There's a *third* thing

here: *pray that the Lord would deliver you in this life*. So David has given himself to God but then he prays, **deliver me from all my transgressions. Do not make me the scorn of the fool!**¹ **I am mute; I do not open my mouth, for it is you who have done it. Remove your stroke**² **from me; I am spent by the hostility of your hand** (vv. 8–10). This isn't easy to do, preparing for death all the while praying for healing, but I believe this is the pattern the Word is giving us.

The last thing David's example teaches us is to *pray that the Lord would give peace*: **hear my prayer, O LORD, and give ear to my cry; hold not your peace at my tears!** Even when our kids have sinned and disobeyed, and even when we rightly disciplined them, our hearts melt when we hear those tears. God our heavenly Father rightly disciplines us to teach us and train us to live a godly life. And his discipline is an act of his love as Hebrews 12 teaches. And David is asking that he would experience once again that overflowing love of God; that God's heart would burst forth in love as he hears the cries and tears of his child under discipline.

¹ *Nabal* is the one who is "insensitive to moral rules and obligations, suffering from an ethical blind-spot." Motyer, 103 n26.

² We've seen this word in 38:11 translated as "plague."

David prays this because, as he says, **for I am a sojourner (*ger*) with you, a guest (*toshabh*), like all my fathers** (v. 12). David is quoting here Leviticus 25:23 where the Lord reminds Israel “the land is mine. For you are strangers and sojourns with me.” Psalm 24 declared that “the earth is the LORD’s and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein” (v. 1). We belong to the Lord and in our life on this earth as we know it know we are temporary guests. After the last day we’ll live again in resurrected bodies as permanent residents in a new heavens and new earth, but until then, we are guests. Until then, we pray for his peace, as David concludes: **Look away from me, that I may smile again, before I depart and am no more!** (v. 13)

Death is central to our faith. Jesus died that we might live forever. And unless he comes quickly, we too will die. God placed this prayer in his Word so that we can use it now as we await our life to come.