

PSALMS

Chapter 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.”² I was mute and silent; I held my peace to no avail, and my distress grew worse.³ My heart became hot within me. As I mused, the fire burned; then I spoke with my tongue:⁴ “O LORD, make me know my end and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting I am!”⁵ Behold, you have made my days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing before you. Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath! *Selah*⁶ 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!⁷ “And now, O Lord, for what do I wait? My hope is in you.”⁸ Deliver me from all my transgressions. Do not make me the scorn of the fool!⁹ I am mute; I do not open my mouth, for it is you who have done it.¹⁰ Remove your stroke from me; I am spent by the hostility of your hand.¹¹ 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*¹² “Hear my prayer, O LORD, and give ear to my cry; hold not your peace at my tears! For I am a sojourner with you, a guest, like all my fathers.”¹³ Look away from me, that I may smile again, before I depart and am no more!”

Ps 39 The poignant prayer of a soul deeply troubled by the fragility of human life. He is reminded of this by the present illness through which God is rebuking him (vv. 10–11) for his “transgressions” (v. 8). Ps 38 speaks of silence before the enemy, Ps 39 of silence before God. Both are prayers in times of illness (God’s “rebuke,” v. 11; 38:1); both acknowledge sin, and both express deep trust in God. This psalm has many links with Ps 90; see also Ps 49. (CSB)

While Ps 38 spoke of silence before the enemy, Ps 39 speaks of silence before God. Both are prayers in times of illness (God’s “discipline,” v 11; 38:1); both acknowledge sin and express deep trust in God. *choirmaster*. See p 993. *Jeduthun*. One of David’s three musicians (1Ch 6:44; 15:12; 16:41–42; 25:1, 6; 2Ch 5:12; 35:15). See p 840. Why this psalm was put into Jeduthun’s (Ethan’s) hands is unclear, as is David’s specific life situation. (TLSB)

Format: Vv 1–3, silence; vv 4–6, shortness of life; vv 7–11, deliver me from Your discipline; vv 12–13, prayer to be heard. (TLSB)

39 title *For the director of music*. See note on Ps 4 title. *Jeduthun*. One of David’s three choir leaders (1Ch 16:41–42; 25:1, 6; 2Ch 5:12; called his “seer” in 2Ch 35:15). Jeduthun is probably also the Ethan of 1Ch 6:44; 15:19; if so, he represented the family of Merari, even as Asaph did the family of Gershon and Heman the family of Kohath, the three sons of Levi (see 1Ch 6:16, 33, 39, 43–44). See titles of Ps 62; 77; 89. (CSB)

39:1–3 Introduction: Having determined to keep silent, he could finally no longer suppress his anguish. (CSB)

Thinking about death filled David with fear and distress. He was hesitant to express these thoughts openly for fear that his enemies might pounce on these feelings as evidence of unbelief. But suppressing his anguish was no solution, because it brought David no relief from his distress. David resolved his conflict by taking his burden to the Lord. (PBC)

39:1 *I said* – He had kept a muzzle on his mouth for fear that rebellious words would escape in the hearing of the wicked (see Ps 73). (CSB)

Augustine: “It is not without reason that the tongue is set in a moist place, but because it is so prone to slip” (NPNF 1 8:112). (TLSB)

He used the image of a muzzle . The word “muzzle” comes from a verb that means “restrain.” (Commentary of the Psalms - Ross)

39:2–3 Suppressed anguish only intensified the agony (see Jer 20:9). (CSB)

39:2 Luther: “[Holding our peace] is very hard to do when we suffer injury from those whom we have benefited, because we are generally quick to exaggerate and magnify the good we have done and the ingratitude of those people, and so we make accusations on a grand scale. And then grief is renewed, because it is a particularly sharp sorrow to receive injury and malice from one whom we have helped and at the same time to keep silent about the good we have done him and let it be construed as something evil” (AE 10:184). (TLSB)

39:3 *fire burned* – The heart (center of thinking in Hbr) is being consumed with a rage of injustice, i.e., his languishing in psychological and physical torment (cf Jer 20:8–9). Finally he speaks. (TLSB)

Burning within is an idea in Scripture that is connected with passionate intensity that moves people to action (see Jer. 20:9; Luke 24:32 – here it is the pain and anguish that moves him to cry out. (Commentary of the Psalms - Ross)

39:4–6 A prayer for understanding and patient acceptance of the brief span of human life. (CSB)

Since human life is so short, we must put our hope in God alone. David realized that he, like all of us, was deserving of death because of his sins. For this reason David did not lash out against God, but accepted his suffering and the threat of death as divine discipline. (PBC)

39:4 *make me know my end* – This has a tone of frustration and anxiety and requests the Lord to reveal his end and inform him of the measure of his life. (Commentary of the Psalms - Ross)

how fleeting I am – Note Psalm 56:8 – TLSB – God cares for His people and pays attention to their pain, fear, and grief. Though David tossed and turned in the night, stressed with anxiety, God has taken careful note of every single moment. *my tears in Your bottle*. God does not forget a single tear shed in grief (cf Rv 21:4). *bottle*. An animal hide prepared to hold wine, milk, or water. *in Your book?* Permanently recorded on a scroll or tablet. Such is the comforting depth of God’s love for His children. (TLSB)

39:5 *a few handbreads* – This is one of the smallest units of measurements in ancient Israel. It is equivalent to “a couple of inches.” In Jeremiah 52:21, the measurement is given in terms of “four fingers thick.” (The Expositor’s Bible Commentary – Psalms)

as nothing before you – See 90:4. (CSB)

a mere *breath* – See v. 11; 144:4; Job 14:2; Ecc 6:12. (CSB)

selah Hebrew; untranslatable. Mainly in the first two books of Psalms. Probably refers to the accompaniment of the harps during the psalm. (TLSB p. 993)

This often occurs in the middle of a psalm and which apparently signals an interlude. “The Sela indicates that one must be still and quickly think through the words of the psalm; for they demand a quiet and restful soul, which can grasp and hold to that which the Holy Spirit there presents and offers” (Luther). (Psalms – The Prayer Book of the Bible – Dietrich Bonhoeffer p. 23)

Selah may be a musical notation. It could also be a point where a pause is desirable for the singer or reader of the psalm in order that the statement last made or the thought as a whole just developed may be reflected upon before the next turn of the thought appears. (Leupold)

39:6 Could almost serve as a summary of Ecclesiastes. (CSB)

as a shadow – A vapor, a mere breath in a vanity of vanities existence (cf Ec 1:1). This is an expression of extreme bitterness. Luth: “The sense that all things are vanity is not a matter of the things themselves but of the man who uses them vainly” (AE 10:186). (TLSB)

not know who will gather – People spend all their lives accumulating things, but when they die they have no idea who will have them. How futile! (ps. 49:10 – they leave their wealth to others. (Commentary of the Psalms - Ross)

39:7–11 A modest prayer: Only grant me relief from your present rebuke. (CSB)

David asked for three blessings from God. He asked for his sins to be forgiven so that death would lose its sting. He asked that his enemies, who were also enemies of the gospel promise, not be allowed to triumph as a result of David’s death. Finally, he asked that he could complete his work of establishing the dynasty of kings from whom Christ would descend. Then he was ready to die in peace. (PBC)

39:7 *my hope is in you* – A wholesome transition. (TLSB)

Everything depends on the place where our hope and trust are fixed, and thus, since the psalmist had for a time lost his moorings, he now rethinks himself as where the anchor of his hope should hold. (Leupold)

39:8 *deliver me* – As from an enemy. (CSB)

David didn’t speak up in v 2, but in his heart he questioned God’s reason for allowing him to fall into this pit. He didn’t want to speak for fear of being “the scorn of the fool!” (cf 22:6–8; 69:6–12). Aug: “In no other way then can you be perfect in this life, than by knowing that you cannot be perfect in this life” (NPNF 1 8:116). (TLSB)

The word “deliver” here means forgive the sin and remove its consequences. (Commentary of the Psalms - Ross)

all my transgressions – This means, on the one hand, forgiveness of these transgressions and, on the other, strength to desist from any wrong course that may have been momentarily followed. (Leupold)

scorn of the fool – If the Lord does not restore him, he will be mocked (see 22:7–8; 69:6–12) by godless fools (see 14:1). (CSB)

If the psalmist did not find forgiveness for his sin and relief from his chastening, such fools would have mocked him and his faith. (Commentary of the Psalms - Ross)

39:9 *I was mute* – Cf vv 1–3. (TLSB)

39:10 *your stroke from me* – See 32:4; 38:2. (CSB)

God is the enemy of the unrepentant. (TLSB)

39:11 *rebuke and discipline* – See 6:1; 38:1. (CSB)

When the Lord makes his correction felt to draw a man away from his sin, then a new realization of the vanity of the things formerly regarded as precious becomes overwhelmingly clear. (Leupold)

moth – Depicts quiet, unsuspected ruin. (TLSB)

a mere *breath* – Melancthon: “The calamities of this world are punishments for the sins of the whole race” (Chem, *LTh* 2:379). (TLSB)

selah – Hebrew; untranslatable. Mainly in the first two books of Psalms. Probably refers to the accompaniment of the harps during the psalm. (TLSB p. 993)

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39:12–13 The modest prayer repeated even more modestly. (CSB)

David’s prayer can also be our prayer at times when we are oppressed by fear of death. Such fears are natural even for a Christian. We, too, must confess, “My hope is you, Lord.” (PBC)

39:12 *give ear to my cry* – Mel: “The calamities of this world are punishments for the sins of the whole race” (Chem, *LTh* 2:379). (TLSB)

I am a sojourner with you – He lives this life before God only as a pilgrim passing through. (CSB)

We live under God’s special care as strangers. God has welcomed us by His Word and Sacraments and makes us His children eternally. We are heirs of His kingdom of heaven. Aug: “The place where I am to abide forever, should be rather called my home.... It is with God that I am a sojourner, with whom I am hereafter to abide, when I have reached my home” (*NPNF* 1 8:118). Cf 2Co 5:1. (TLSB)

39:13 *Look away from me* – See Job 7:17–19; 10:20–21; 14:6. (CSB)

This is a figure, expressing his desire for God to let up on him – stop paying so much attention to his sin. (Commentary of the Psalms - Ross)

smile again – See Job 9:27; 10:20. (CSB)

am no more – Here there is no glimpse of what lies beyond the horizon of death– Death could even be a blessing for the righteous, affording escape from the greater evil that would overtake the living. Furthermore, the death of the righteous was better than that of the wicked. There was an awareness that death (as observed) was not the end of hope for the righteous, that God had more in store for them.). (CSB)

Ps 39 Veiled in uncertainty is a flickering faith that puts its hope in God and in His strength and promise to rescue all who call on His name. In the midst of this life of vapors, phantoms, and threats, we often push God away. Despite this, He hears and answers our prayers. For we are His children through His Word and Holy Baptism, and He is our safe harbor and anchor of salvation and protection. • Heavenly Father, what would we be if You forsook us, if You withdrew Your Word and Your hand? Enlighten us with Your Word. Let us walk in the light of Your blessed Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (TLSB)