



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States



The Holy Book of Psalms

Psalm 39

Bishop Youssef



Introduction

- This psalm is titled *To the Chief Musician. To Jeduthun. A Psalm of David.*
- *The Chief Musician* is thought by some to be the Lord GOD Himself, and others suppose him to be a leader of choirs or musicians in David's time, such as Heman the singer or Asaph (1 Chronicles 6:33, 16:5-7, 25:6)
- *Jeduthun* (mentioned also in the titles of Psalm 62 and 77) was numbered among the sons of Merari and he was supposed to have been one of the masters of music, along with Heman and Asaph, appointed by David to lead Israel's public worship (1 Chronicles 16:41, 25:1-3)



Introduction

- He appears to have been also called Ethan (1 Chronicles 15:17)
- According to St. Augustine, the name 'Jeduthun' suits this psalm; because his name means (over-leaping them)
- He says, "Who then is this person "over-leaping them"? or who those whom he hath "over-leaped"?...For there are some persons, yet clinging to the earth, yet bowed down to the ground, yet setting their hearts on what is below, yet placing their hopes in things that pass away, whom he who is called "over-leaping them" hath "over-leaped."



Introduction

- This Psalm is a personal lamentation, sung by someone suffering at the prime of his life, who, feeling the burden of sin, stands in silence, contemplates in the vanity of temporal life
- It is about perspective...perspective about life, about silence and speech, about trials, and about the true meaning of everything we do and everything we are
- Some thought that David gave this Psalm to Jeduthun and his company to sing after he had composed it
- But some others have believed that Jeduthun himself was the author
- However, it is clear from its title that David is the author



Introduction

- The Psalm is closely connected in thought and language with Psalms 38
- It is very likely that it was written on the same occasion with Psalm 38
- It relates to a grievous illness and trouble by which David was afflicted after his transgression with Bath-sheba
- Others think it was written at the time of Absalom's rebellion against his father David
- This Psalm, like Psalms 38 and 40, has been regarded by some critics as the utterance of the nation rather than of an individual



Introduction

Psalm Outline

- David's Silent Agony 39:1-3
- David's Wise Words 39:4-6
- A Prayer Seeking Deliverance 39:7-11
- A Humble Prayer Seeking Divine Response 39:12-13



David's Silent Agony 39:1-3

- He started his psalm by saying, *I said*, in his heart
- According to St. Ambrose, the psalmist was talking to himself, while he was silent with the wicked
- He purposed and determined within himself to *guard* his *ways*
- The psalmist remind himself of a pledge he made to God, and to himself, not to open his mouth in the presence of the wicked, *lest* he would probably be stirred up and *sin by his tongue*
- Fearing to talk to the wicked, he prefers to endure his tribulation in silence because logic is never accepted by the wicked, whose way is violence and oppression



David's Silent Agony 39:1-3

- He does not fear the wicked, but he rather fears that he, himself, would probably fall with his tongue
- As we read in James 3:2,8, *"If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body.; ... But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison"*
- The psalmist recognizes that words are both powerful and can be used to build up and tear down
- Words can be misunderstood and misused
- They can both solve problems and create more problems



David's Silent Agony 39:1-3

- The psalmist understands that people can easily sin with their words
- Words can express lies and gossip
- They can give voice to harsh criticism; words can hurt
- *guard my ways*, As every good man should in all his actions, conduct, and conversation
- He was going to watch his ways and try to not sin with his tongue in front of people he knew who did not know the Lord
- So, he was able to do this – to keep quiet in front of the wicked – even when he felt like he needed to express his great difficulties



David's Silent Agony 39:1-3

- *muzzle*, is a bridle or a strap placed over the horse's mouth to guide him
- It was something to bind or fasten the mouth so as to prevent biting or eating, Deuteronomy 25:4
- The meaning here is, that he would double his guard and restrain himself from uttering what was passing in his mind
While the wicked are before him
- He kept absolute silence, speaking neither good nor bad
- As the natural result of controlling any strong feeling his pain was not calmed thereby, nor even lessened; rather, it was roused up, hastened, and worsened as we read in verse 2



David's Silent Agony 39:1-3

- He could bridle his tongue, but he could not keep his passion under
- He soon felt the pressure that one feels when intense feelings are kept silent
- It is difficult, however, for the psalmist to refrain from speaking
- He becomes distressed; a *fire burns* within him
- He struggles to hold himself back, but when he finally bursts into speech, it is not a tirade directed toward the wicked, but a prayer directed toward God
- The psalmist knows how to make his words most effective...talk to God



David's Wise Words 39:4-6

- David's silence was broken in the best way – by humble prayer to God
- He would not speak his fears and doubts before the wicked, but he would pour them out before his God
- This led him to discover the truth of human life, concerning its weakness and short span
- Although this is a fact well known by all men, yet, there is great difference between knowing it and living by it
- So, David asked God for wisdom – specifically, the wisdom to know the shortness and the frailty of his life *that I may know how frail I am*



David's Wise Words 39:4-6

- Our days are no longer than a few *handbreadths* in God's sight, almost nothing
- The psalmist asks God to make him aware of this
- *Lord, let me know my end*, He begs, and *what is the measure of my days...*
- David was a champion, an accomplished warrior, a leader, a skilled poet, a musical expert, a survivor, and a king
- If anyone might have thought more highly of himself, David had the right to
- Yet he understood that he, like *every man* is – *at his best state* – merely *a vapor*, a puff of steam or smoke



David's Wise Words 39:4-6

- So, knowing the shortness of his life, he can focus his attention not on the things of this life, those material things of the world that come and go easily and will not last into eternity, but on God
- Life will pass away; things will pass away, and the days fly by
- But God remains the same
- He is greater than our lives, greater than this world, greater than even the greatest of anything
- He is eternal and we must give our fragile lives to Him
- *Selah*, The idea in the Hebrew for this word (occurring 74 times in the Old Testament) is for a *pause*



David's Wise Words 39:4-6

- Most people think it speaks of a reflective pause, a pause to meditate on the words just spoken
- It may also be a musical instruction, for a musical pause of some kind
- This *Selah* is an appropriate call for each one to *pause* and think of the shortness and frailty of his life
- *Surely every man walks about like a shadow*, Sounding very much like the later Book of Ecclesiastes, David thought about the multitude of people who live ignoring the shortness and frailty of life



David's Wise Words 39:4-6

- *a shadow*, Or image, living a life with no substance, in an imaginary rather than a real life; in the pursuit of vain imaginations, in which there is nothing real or fitting
- They are *busy*, but in *vain*, being blind to eternal things
- Each of them works hard and *heaps up riches*, yet does not think beyond his own short and frail life
- “Riches are vain if spent on luxurious life, but are not vain if given to the needy.” (St. John Chrysostom)
- Three times in this psalm, David is having to remind himself that “man” – “every man” even – is empty, is vain, is a vapor that passes away



David's Wise Words 39:4-6

- St. John Chrysostom says, "Tell me; If we see someone chase the wind, attempting to hold it, Would we not say that he is out of his mind?... If we see someone try hold a shadow, disregarding the actual thing; If we see someone hate his wife, and embrace her shadow; or hate his son, and love his shadow; Would you need further proof for his folly? ... Likewise, are those who greedily seek the existing things, that are actually nothing but shadows; Yes, whether glory, power, good life, wealth, luxury, or similar things in this life; according to the words of the prophet: "My days are like a shadow that lengthens, and I wither away like grass"

A Prayer Seeking Deliverance

39:7-11



- Under these circumstances - human life being what it is, and all men nothing but vanity, David asks, *what do I wait for?* what is my expectation? what is my hope?
- A cry, as it would seem, of utter despair, but the psalmist ends his complaint by throwing himself into the arms of the Divine mercy, and completely submitting himself to God's will
- After perceiving the shortness and frailty of life, David put his expectation and hope upon God and not upon himself
- It seems as if the wicked are out of his mind now as he's focused on the Lord alone

A Prayer Seeking Deliverance

39:7-11



- David looked to God and not to himself for deliverance from sin
- He knew – as the Apostle Paul would later declare – that the focus should be on God and not self (Romans 7:24,8:4)
- The psalmist prays to be delivered not merely from his present afflictions but from the power of the sins which he recognizes as the cause of them
- *the foolish*, The ungodly
- David is asking God to not let their prosperity and his misery give them a reason to scorn him
- Lest they consider his trust in God of insignificant purpose

A Prayer Seeking Deliverance

39:7-11



- He calls the ungodly *foolish*, because though they profess and think themselves to be wise, yet they are indeed fools, as is manifest from their eager pursuit of fruitless vanities, 39:6, and from their complete neglect of God and his service, who only is able to make men happy

A Prayer Seeking Deliverance

39:7-11



- David is going back to the beginning of the Psalm where he felt compelled to not speak of God's chastening of his sin in front of the wicked
- Why was he silent? It's because God was chastening him, God *did it*
- David prayed this prayer from the sense that he was under the painful correction of God
- He successfully avoided speaking words of self-justification; as he poured out his heart to God, he also prayed for relief from his affliction

A Prayer Seeking Deliverance

39:7-11



- David has been experiencing something that he considers a *plague* – a chastisement or judgment
- It refers to the trial which he was then enduring
- David perceives that it is from God's *hand*
- This plague-like *blow* is from the Lord
- And as we saw earlier, it's a result of his sin
- Though David will *not open* his *mouth* to complain, yet he may open it to pray, that God would take off the judgment that He has inflicted upon him
- *I am consumed*, David asks for help before he is completely lost

A Prayer Seeking Deliverance

39:7-11



- David submitted to God's will and to His chastening as expressed in verse 9, however that does not take away the desire that the hand of God may be removed, and that the suffering that is brought upon him may end
- Perfect submission is not conflicting or contradictory with the prayer that, if it be the will of God, the suffering and trouble may be removed as Jesus prayed, Luke 22:42
- According to the psalmist, God allows our trials as a means of discipline
- The sufferings which God sends on a man are of the nature of *rebukes* directed to his spirit

A Prayer Seeking Deliverance

39:7-11



- They are intended to teach, instruct, warn, prevent from evil-doing (Job 36:8-10)
- As *a moth* destroy a beautiful garment, so does God's displeasure and heavy hand pressing on men crushes and destroy all which have been their delight and glory
- *his beauty*, It refers to anything that is to man an object of desire or delight - strength, beauty, possessions, life itself
- Some may get angry at God for His chastening and may question His ways
- But that is not David's response

A Prayer Seeking Deliverance

39:7-11



- Instead of getting angry at God, David looks at and considers the nature of the sinner, *Surely every man is vapor*
- We are all vanity
- We are all a mere vapor
- We are a cloud blown through the atmosphere
- St. Augustine comments and says, “Let Him who created me renew me; Let Him create me anew ... This is the foremost gift of God’s grace; to make us confess our shortcomings; that however good we do, and whatever our capabilities are, ... *‘He who glories, let him glory in the Lord’* (1 Corinthians 1: 31)”

A Humble Prayer Seeking Divine Response 39:12-13



- David appealed to God asking that He answer with mercy upon him feeling he is separated from God
- Tears appeal to God's mercy in an especial way
- *"Do not weep"* (Luke 7:13) said our Lord to the widow woman at Nain
- And to Mary Magdalene, *"woman, why are you weeping?"* (John 20:13)
- He Himself *"offered up prayers and supplications with vehement cries and tears"* (Hebrews 5:7)
- *Do not be silent at my tears*, Do not refuse to answer me; to speak peace to me

A Humble Prayer Seeking Divine Response 39:12-13



- God looks with compassion to the tears of the repentant, the tears of sufferer because it is difficult sometimes to find words that can express the sorrows of the soul
- David was not only a native Israeli, but *the king of Israel*
- If anyone had a claim to citizenship it would be him
- Yet he understood that his real home was in heaven and not upon this earth
- St. Augustine says, "*For I am a stranger with You, But with whom am I a 'sojourner'? When I was with the devil, I was a 'sojourner';*"

A Humble Prayer Seeking Divine Response 39:12-13



- *He also says, “What is meant by a sojourner? I am a “sojourner” in the place from which I am to remove; not in the place where I am to dwell for ever. The place where I am to abide forever, should be rather called my home. In the place from which I am to remove I am a ‘sojourner;’ but yet it is with my God that I am a sojourner, with whom I am hereafter to abide, when I have reached my home.”*
- *as all my fathers were, Meaning Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob*
- *They thus lived as men who had no permanent home here and whose whole life, therefore, was an illustration of the fact that they were “on a journey” - a journey to another world*

A Humble Prayer Seeking Divine Response 39:12-13



- Knowing that his weakness was due to the heavy hand of God upon him, David humbly asked God to look at him no longer with the eyes of correction and forgive him
- David is asking that God turn his angry destructive *gaze* from him
- And if God does that, David says that he will *regain strength*
- He wants to be comforted
- In conclusion, David is asking for a short time of refreshment and rest, before he is called on to leave the earth and be *no more*

A Humble Prayer Seeking Divine Response 39:12-13



- After being reduced to a moth-eaten garment – after trying to hide his pain and chastening by the Lord from the wicked around him – all David wants is to simply be able to have some rest before he dies
- Some interpret verse 13 a passionate wish that God would send him help quickly or it would be too late
- This Psalm is all about perspective...perspective about life, about silence and speech, about trials, and about the true meaning of everything we do and everything we are



Discussion

- What precaution did David refer to in the opening verse of this Psalm?
- Why had David determined not to speak of his anguish?
- What had David learned about the brevity of life?
- According to David, why does God rebuke people?



Discussion

- How did David demonstrate his humility in this prayer? (verses 12-13)
- What motivated David to write this poem?
- Knowing that life is brief, how will you make the most of it?