

Psalm 39

The psalm gives us echoes of Rosh Hashanah, of Yom Kippur and of Tabernacles.

There's a cry for consolation and comfort **vs 10-13** (Rosh Hashanah), and a confession of sin **vs 8** (Yom Kippur), and a realization that our home in this world is fragile booth **vs. 5-6, 11** (Tabernacles).

In our Torah reading, Jacob says he is close to death, and so calls Joseph and his sons to bless them. He had previously told Pharaoh that his days were "few and evil." This psalm emphasizes the vanity of human existence.

David of course is speaking here of his own situation, but this psalm also revisits Jacob's struggles, and according to Rashi, in **Psalm 39:9** "...do not make me the reproach of an ignoble man," the "ignoble man" refers to Esau.

For us, the ignoble man is our flesh.

Psalm 39:1-2 - "I said, I will take heed to my ways, that I sin not with my tongue: I will keep my mouth with a bridle, while the wicked is before me. I was dumb with silence, I held my peace, even from good; and my sorrow was stirred."

"When the wicked is before me, in my thoughts. When David was contemplating the pride and power, the prosperity and flourishing estate of evil-doers, he was tempted to speak amiss." - *Matthew Henry Commentary*

Rashi - Neither to criticize nor speak harshly of the Divine Attribute of Justice although the wicked who oppress us are before us.

In other words, David is tempted to malign the intentions of God, to accuse him of injustice.

James 1:26 - "If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not bridle/muzzle his tongue, he deceives his heart and his religion is worthless"

The previous verse contains the remedy:

James 1:25 - "But the one who looks intently into the perfect law of freedom, and continues to do so — not being a forgetful hearer, but an effective doer — he will be blessed in what he does."

i.e. Looking past the circumstances and seeing Christ instead of yourself.

Alternately, speaking even the *truth* without love or empathy or genuine confirmation within yourself from the Spirit (a burning heart) is vain.

Once David's sorrow (pain) was sufficiently stirred, he allowed himself to speak his

complaint to God, like Jeremiah:

Jeremiah 15:18 - "Why is my pain perpetual, and my wound incurable, which refuseth to be healed? wilt thou be altogether unto me as a liar, and as waters that fail?"

Psalm 39:3-4 - "My heart was hot within me, while I was musing the fire burned: then spake I with my tongue, LORD, make me to know mine end, and the measure of my days, what it is; that I may know how frail I am."

"Frail" = rejected, transient, fleeting, lacking. From a root that means ceasing to be, destitute.

This is an irresistible outburst from the heart. Lightfoot points to the disciples on the road to Emmaus:

Luke 24:32 - "Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?"

and **Jeremiah 20:9** - "His word was in mine heart as a burning fire."

In the Babylonian Talmud, tract Taanith: R. Alai Bar Barachiah saith, If two disciples of the wise men journey together, and do not maintain some discourse betwixt themselves concerning the law, they deserve to be burnt; according as it is said, "It came to pass, as they still went on and talked, behold a chariot of fire, and horses of fire," - 2 Kings 2.

Talmud (Shabbat 30a) says God did not accede to David's request "to know mine end, and the measure of my days": "I have decreed that the end of flesh and blood is not knowable."

But see **Psalm 90:12** - "teach us o number our days"

It is with this very idea in mind that many wear the kittel on Yom Kippur, a burial shroud to remind one of the day of his death. The Day of Atonement is thus an annual encounter with death and human frailty.

Realizing that All is Vanity

Psalm 39:5-6 - "Behold, thou hast made my days as an handbreadth; and mine age is as nothing before thee: verily every man at his best state is altogether vanity. *Selah*. Surely every man walketh in a vain shew: surely they are disquieted in vain: he heapeth up riches, and knoweth not who shall gather them."

The Jewish version translates "surely they are disquieted in vain" as: "For vanity only do all men make a noise." The clamor and tumult of human existence is all about nothing.

"Selah" - of unsure meaning. Could be a pause in the music. Possibly from *calah*, whose secondary meaning is to value, to weigh as in Job 28:16 and 19. Or from *salal*, meaning build up or exalt.

A Messianic Cry

Beginning in the garden of Gethsemane, Christ is taking on the sins of the world, feeling the reality of human vanity as well as their transgressions. He begins to feel like he is “being “consumed away” under the judgment of God.

Luke 22:42 - “Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done.”

Psalm 39:7 - “And now, Lord, what wait I for? my hope is in thee.”

At the center of this psalm, in the literary structure, David places hope. This is the “thy will be done” part of Christ’s struggle at Gethsemane.

Combined with **verse 7**, the rest of the psalm ultimately reflects the agony of Christ at Gethsemane, sweating blood as he struggles with the cup set before him.

Psalm 39:9-10 - “I was dumb, I opened not my mouth; because thou didst it. Remove thy stroke away from me: I am consumed by the blow of thine hand.”

Compare **Isaiah 53:7** - “He was oppressed and He was afflicted, Yet He did not open His mouth; Like a lamb that is led to slaughter, And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers, So He did not open His mouth.”

Psalm 39:12 - “Hear my prayer, O LORD, and give ear unto my cry; hold not thy peace at my tears: for I am a stranger with thee, and a sojourner, as all my fathers were.”

A stranger and exile on earth, *but with you!* Talmud: The Shekinah accompanies Israel into exile.

“The fathers” would include Jacob, dying in exile in Egypt.

Talmud: Rabbi Eleazar says ... though the gates of prayer are closed [because of the destruction of the Temple], the gates of tears are not closed, for it is written, “Hear my prayer, O LORD, and give ear unto my cry; do not disregard my tears...”

Psalm 39:13 (NET) - “Turn your angry gaze away from me, so I can be happy before I pass away.”

“be happy” - *balag* - the break loose, to desist from grief. Secondly to smile, to have a cheerful countenance.

“pass away” - The word “am no more” in Hebrew is *eineni*, which is a contraction from *ein ani*: “I am not.”

If this psalm gives us a reflection of the cross, then “I am not” is the spiritual response,

what Paul calls “reckoning yourself as dead.” We are not, He is.

Romans 6:11 - “Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God...”

Death

We associate death with an awesome sense of accountability. It seems as though death is the final crucible in which the mettle of our lives is tested. The Talmud reflects this idea when it says, "The dead reap the desert of the acts they performed while alive" (Shabbat 30b). This sense of accountability points directly back to the source of death itself. "There is not death without sin" (Shabbat 55a). "From a woman did sin originate, and because of her all must die" (Ben Sira 25:28). If death is a result of sin, then death becomes the climax of our accountability. It is at this point in the writings that there appears to be some discrepancy as to whether this sin which brought about death is inherent in human nature. David says, "In sin did my mother conceive me" (Psalm 51:7), and in reference to original sin, the apocryphal book IV Ezra explains, "O thou Adam, what hast thou done. For though it was thou that sinned, the fall was not thine alone but ours also who are thy descendants." Yet Baruch 54:19, another apocryphal source, tells us that each of us has been the Adam of his own soul, placing the responsibility and accountability back on our own shoulders.

— See <http://www.appleofhiseye.org/seeking-god/explore-a-jewish-perspective/the-final-encounter>

Isaiah 53:4-5 - “Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth ...”