

The Futility of Life

A Sermon on Psalm 39

by

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1. Introduction

2. The Fruitlessness of Silence (vv. 1-3).

a. *David resigns himself to silence so he will not sin before wicked people, and it led to only more vexation (vv. 1-2).*

- i. David opens this psalm, ironically enough, by speaking about his vow of silence. There is a bit of fear with David, but I want you to notice why.
 1. His fear is not that his enemies will twist his words and use them against him, but that he would sin with his words.
 2. He figures it is better to remain completely silent than to let a word of sin slip.
- ii. Notice he says in v. 2 that he refrained from speaking, the result was that his sorrow grew worse.
 1. Some of your translations will say that David refrained from speaking even of good things.
 - a. The emphasis is on the type of words he would say, but the result.
 - b. Instead of producing something qualitatively good, it brought it even more trouble his way.
 2. The point of this is not so much to say that David needed to vent his pent-up feelings, but that his efforts proved to be fruitless.
 - a. This is not advocating that David somehow needed to express his felt needs and find a trusted confidant that he could pour out his sinful speech to.

- b. There was wisdom in his desire to keep from sinning in his speech, but he went well beyond what was actually good for him.
- b. *David's time of silence produced contemplation, and a "burning" inability to hold silent any longer (v. 3).*
 - i. Notice he says his heart was hot within him and while he was contemplating the discipline of the Lord, the fire burned within him.
 - 1. Here he simply speaking to a reality that in his silence, he moved to contemplation, and in his contemplation, he was provoked all the more to break that silence.
 - 2. The more he thought about his situation, the more painful it became, but he could no longer hold silent.
 - ii. The remainder of this psalm then is the content of everything that was going on within him.
 - 1. These are the thoughts of a man who has realized the true frailty and vanity of life.
 - 2. As we move through the remainder of this psalm, I want you to keep in mind that everything David says here flows from this reality of *hebel*.
 - a. There is a pointlessness to pain and a tragedy to human existence, because we are here today and gone tomorrow.
 - b. If all your life is, is a vapor everyone will inevitably come to the point of recognizing the futility of striving after vanity.

3. The Futility of Life (vv. 4-6).

- a. *David learns the true brevity of life (vv. 4-5).*
 - i. "Lord, make me to know my end and what is the extent of my days; let me know how transient I am. Behold, you have made my days as handbreadths, and my lifetime as nothing in Your sight; surely every man at his best is mere *hebel*."

1. The first thing I want to draw your attention to here is that when David finally speaks, notice to whom he speaks and why.
 - a. As David recognizes his frailty, he comes to the One he knows can actually provide an answer.
 - b. David has a keen awareness of his mortality and he pleads with a sense of urgency for the Lord to simply reveal how much time he has left.
 2. And yet out of this desperate cry for an answer, David is given an incredible glimpse into just how short life truly is.
 - a. He speaks of his own days being as handbreadths, which is just the width of your palm.
 - b. Surely, if David can see his own life flash before his eyes and sees how insignificant his days are, he knows such a life is truly insignificant before the eternal God.
 - c. It is this that leads him to recognize the fact that every man—even man at his best, is mere *hebel*.
- ii. This is the sobering reality of every man, woman, and child—even if we like to pretend it's not.
 1. No matter how much you and I may try to hold off the power of death, it will come for us.
 2. At the heart of accepting this reality is wisdom.
- b. *David learns the true frailty of life (v. 6).*
 - i. “Surely, every man walks about as a phantom; surely they make an uproar for nothing; he amasses riches and does not know who will gather them.”
 1. David says that every man walks about as a phantom.
 2. What he means by this is that all of humanity is like a shadow being cast from a statue.

- a. Man gives the appearance of something that is lasting, but they are always fading from existence.
 - b. They are somewhere between life and death, and so they are like a phantom reality, or a ghost, if you will.
 - 3. Yet he goes on to say, “Surely, they make an uproar for nothing.”
 - a. What he means here is that men are always moving about in pursuit of endless, self-defeating pursuits.
 - b. They are ever-busy in the rat race of life, where like the mouse chasing after the smallest morsel of cheese they will never grab ahold of it, but they keep on trying.
 - 4. Then, David moves on to speak about this same reality with wealth at the end of v. 6, “He amasses riches and does not know who will gather them.”
 - a. This is one of those verses the speak to heart of so many of us and displays where our hearts truly are.
 - b. He’s not saying money is inherently evil, but that even our wealth and our possessions are *hebel*.
- ii. This is the ultimate meaning behind David’s cry in vv. 4-5; he is a man who has his sights truly set on what *actually* matters.
 - 1. He’s expressing the same thing his son Solomon did at the very end of the book of Ecclesiastes.
 - a. In Ecclesiastes, Solomon spends nearly eleven full chapters detailing all of the ways that life is filled with this reality known as *hebel*.
 - b. He has searched out wisdom and tested everything, and he has seen that everything under the sun is vanity.
 - 2. But in the end Solomon calls upon everyone to do two simple things: rejoice and remember.
 - 3. What we see David saying and praying for here is much the same.

4. The Folly of Sin (vv. 7-11).

a. *David confesses his hope is in God alone (v. 7).*

- i. As we come to verse 7, we find that David is starting to make a turning point towards hope.
 1. He has patiently endured through the discipline of the Lord in silence—and yet as we saw, his silence proved to be an exercise in futility.
 2. He pours forth a series of statements on the fleeting and temporary nature of life, yet underneath it, hope is bubbling to the surface.
- ii. He asks, “And now, Lord, for what do I wait?” His answer? “My hope is in You.”
 1. David looks out and sees that nothing in this transient life can bring him hope and deliverance from his discipline.
 - a. All of life and everything in it cannot bring him fulfillment or deliverance.
 - b. And so, what does he wait for, but deliverance and salvation from God Himself?
 2. As everything under the sun is *hebel*, we see the one thing that isn’t, is God.
 - a. The one and only thing in life and death that will never prove to be futile is that which is above the sun, which is God.
 - b. Everything that is in existence today will be burned up and destroyed as the earth is made new.

b. *David confesses his frailty before God due to his sin (v. 8-11).*

- i. “Deliver me from all my transgressions; make me not the reproach of the foolish. I have become mute, I do not open my mouth, because it is You

who have done it. Remove your plague from me; because of the opposition of Your hand I am perishing.”

1. Notice the first request David makes of God is quite simple: deliver me from all my sins (v. 8-9).
 - a. The word for deliver here speaks of the act of God snatching him away from his sin and its consequences.
 - b. The reason for this is quite simple, and goes back to what David requested earlier in the Psalm. He does not want to be the reproach of fools.
 - c. David has resigned himself to silence yet again in v. 9, but this time it is different. This is not a foreboding silence like earlier, but an accepting silence.
 2. The second request of David then is that the Lord would remove His punishment from him (v. 10).
 - a. Once again, David is highlighting that his sin has brought him near to the point of death.
 - b. The important thing for us to take note of is that this request comes in light of the fact that he learned the instruction that discipline was intended to bring.
- ii. “With reproofs You chasten a man for iniquity; You consume as a moth what is precious to him; surely every man is mere *hebel*.”
1. Sin brings nothing but rebuke, and part of that rebuke is the removal of the things we find most precious to us.
 - a. This is a hard truth for us to swallow, but when the discipline of the Lord comes upon us, it can involve losing what we love the most.
 - b. What is in your mind as I say this?
 2. Surely, every man is mere *hebel*. He is but a vapor, here today and gone tomorrow. In other words, even you and I, are *vanity*.

3. The point in recognizing that all of life is vanity, and that we are even vanity, is that we find ultimate meaning and satisfaction in God alone.
 - a. Life itself will bring no ultimate meaning to us.
 - b. Our pursuits for glory and renown will bring no ultimate meaning.
 - c. Our pursuits for riches and possessions will bring us no ultimate meaning.
 - d. And even plunging ourselves into the fleeting pleasures of sin will bring no fulfillment or meaning to us.

5. The Felicitousness of Mercy (vv. 12-13).

a. David cries to the Lord to hear him, a mere sojourner on earth (v. 12).

- i. “Hear my prayer, O Lord, and give ear to my cry; do not be silent at my tears; for I am a stranger with You, a sojourner like all my fathers.”
 1. David’s cry to the Lord is simple: bring relief and end my suffering. The reason he gives is also quite simple: he is a stranger and sojourner in this life.
 - a. At the heart of David’s plea is a recognition that he is just passing through this life.
 - b. Here we see the humility of a man who has recognized his place before His Creator. He is just a man.
 2. Yet David is not being self-deprecating by saying he is just one of the many people who will come and go on this earth.
 - a. He is a sojourner on this earth *with* God Himself.
 - b. There is an aspect here where David is longing for God’s special care here on earth.
 - c. But there is also an aspect where David longs for his true home with God in heaven.

b. David cries to the Lord to relieve him so he can rejoice before he dies (v. 13).

- i. “Turn Your gaze from me, that I might smile again, before I depart and am no more.”
 - 1. David knows he has little time left, whether his sickness will carry him to the grave or not.
 - 2. So, he asks the Lord to “let up” on him so he can simply enjoy whatever time he has left.
 - a. His point here is not a call to pursue all of the things he has said are vanity above.
 - b. Rather, it is a call to find joy in the midst of the minutia of life—but *true* joy.
- ii. Even though life is often brutal, and all of simple joys in life can still be fraught with the pain and brokenness of sin, is there not still much to rejoice in, beloved?
 - 1. At the end of your days, whether they are long or short, if your true, unfailing hope is in God, there is much to smile over.
 - 2. If you are in Christ, none of the dark days and regrets of life have to consume you.

6. Conclusion

Small Group Questions

1. Think on the reality of the futility of life. What is this designed to teach us?
2. We are called to remember and rejoice; how can we do this properly as sojourners and strangers in this fleeting life?
3. As you look on decisions that have been made over the course of your life and some of the regrets you may have, how does God being “above the sun” shape how you think on these things?