

Number Your Days

Psalm 39

It's commonplace to say life is short. What isn't common is to number your days before God so as to live faithfully before Him. David gave this psalm to Jeduthun the chief musician (2 Chron. 5:12) to set to music so that God's people would not despair or squander their days but sing and live joyfully before the Lord.

Summary of the Text

Psalm 39 divides into four parts. David begins by describing his resolve to guard his mouth before the wicked lest he sin and give them opportunity to sin (vv. 1-3). He then asks the Lord to make him know his end, the measure of his days, so that he would know how frail and transient life is (vv. 4-6). In the third section he asks for deliverance from his transgression (vv. 7-11). He doesn't want fools to reproach him, which is why he was silent in the first place (v. 9). In the last section David asks God to hear his cry and respond to his tears because he sojourns with the Lord and would do so with strength and joy before he dies (vv. 12-13).

Golden Silence

David watches his words because the wicked are present and willing to distort them (vv. 1-2). He's like a furnace unable to express any heat, meditating on the situation and becoming frustrated while being faithful. Many words usually carry many sins: "In the multitude of words sin is not lacking, but he who restrains his lips is wise" (Prov. 10:19); "Even a fool is counted wise when he holds his peace; when he shuts his lips, he is considered perceptive" (Prov. 17:28). The issue here is not just quantity of words but context. If David cries out, "Why did you do this, Lord? You're killing me!", his enemies would say "Exactly. Curse God and die!" The psalms not only teach how to complain, but where. He guards his mouth which creates a refining fire for words within, ready to be released in prayer (v. 3). This stanza displays godly restraint.

Know My End

Man in rebellion against God wants information in order to manipulate, self-aggrandize, and be as God apart from honoring Him: "Then the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:4-5). If you knew when you would die, what would you do differently? David wants to understand the reality of his end in order to know how frail he is (v. 4). He acknowledges his days are the width of a palm, nothing before God, and that man at his best is a vapor (v. 5). He repeats the word *vapor* (*hevel*) in verses six ("in vain") and eleven, and finishes verses five and eleven with *Selah*, meaning "meditate, pause, consider this." From the fact that every man walks upon this earth like a shadow, he says men busy themselves in vain or make an uproar for nothing (v. 6). Both accomplishment and anxiety come to nothing; ultimate satisfaction cannot be found there. David's high school trophy collection isn't that interesting. And what were you worried about three weeks ago? Man also heaps up riches without knowing who will gather them (v. 6). He dies having accrued so much and doesn't even know who will do what with it. The point is not to forgo awards and financial gain, but to know your finitude and lack of control over anything. Rather than make everything meaningless, this empowers you to pray and labor in faith now (cf. Prov. 27:23-24).

Deliver Me Anyway

In light of this misty existence, what is David after? He asks the Lord: "what do I wait for?" My hope is in You" (v. 7). He transgressions give opportunity for the foolish to attack, and he doesn't say anything because he recognizes God is the one plaguing him (vv. 8-10). Man sins like a moth that gets too close to the fire; poof, he's a wreck, *Selah* (v. 11). David knew the height of victory and enthronement and the depth of defeat and exile. He was the man after God's own heart and the oppressor who took Uriah's wife and life. For all of

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mankind's fleeting existence, God gives Himself to be our hope. We wonder both at His willingness to correct and bless us (Ps. 8:4; Job 7:17-19). God is infinitely kind in His discipline and generosity. It's faithful to pray, "Lord, You don't need me, so save me anyway." We are inconsequential yet God cares about and for us in exhausting detail.

The Joyful Pilgrim

David concludes this psalm in a surprising and challenging way. He asks God to hear his prayer, give ear to his cry, and not be silent to his tears because he's a stranger with Him and a sojourner as all his fathers were (v. 12). He wants the Lord to remove His gaze of discipline so that he would regain strength, take comfort, and be cheerful before he dies (v. 13). Why does he mention the fathers? Because they had a fleeting and futile existence? Verse twelve is alluded to in Hebrews:

Therefore sprang there even of one, and him as good as dead, so many as the stars of the sky in multitude, and as the sand which is by the sea shore innumerable. These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country. And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city. 11:12-16

The carnal mind thinks "Life is fleeting. I'm miserable. Get me out of here!" But when Abraham and Sarah were past the child-begetting years, they believed God and so the son of promise, Isaac, was born. They knew that through Abraham would come a multitude of nations and in him all the families of the earth would be blessed (Gen. 12:3, 17:5). David and all the fathers sought a better country, the heavenly city because they believed the promises which were still afar off. The kingdom of God comes from heaven to earth as we pray "Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." David wants to go to heaven but to be joyfully faithful now before he goes. He's a pilgrim but not "just passing through" with no mission, no promises, no hope for what the gospel will do on the earth. He looked to the Son of David, the Lord Jesus who fulfilled the promises and for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame. He died, rose, and ascended into heaven to pour out the Spirit and save us through the preaching of the gospel so that we would number and spend our days as faithful sojourners with Him.