

Psalms 39 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.

First, the psalmist offers some perspective about life. Life is fleeting, he says. We human beings are frail creatures. Our days are no longer than a "few handbreaths" in God's sight, almost nothing. "Surely everyone stands as a mere breath," he notes twice. 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..." 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. The days fly by. The years flow on. But God remains the same. He is greater than our lives, greater than this world, greater than even the greatest, fanciest, most expensive material thing. He is eternal. We must give our fragile lives to Him.

Second, the psalmist reflects on silence and speech. At the beginning of the psalm, he says, "I will guard my ways that I may not sin with my tongue; I will keep a muzzle on my mouth as long as the wicked are in my presence." The psalmist recognizes that words are both powerful and much misinterpreted. They can be used to build up and tear down. They can both solve problems and create more problems. They can both soothe and inflame. The psalmist understands that people can easily sin with their words. Words can express lies, nastiness, and gossip. They can give voice to harsh criticism and unfair demands. Simply, words can hurt.

Further, the psalmist grasps the fact that sometimes words are useless. He says that he was "still and silent" when he was with wicked people. He held his peace. He knew that his words would not change people who are set in their wicked ways. In fact, speech may only provoke them more. 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.

Finally, the psalmist understands that patient silence is often the best response to troubles and trials. He doesn't complain. He doesn't waste his words in useless laments. Instead, he holds his tongue; he accepts God's will even though it is difficult.

This brings us into the third theme upon which the psalmist offers perspective, namely, trials. Why do we have trials? According to the psalmist, God allows our trials as discipline. "You chastise mortals," he tells God, "in punishment for sin." We have all sinned. We all need to change. God doesn't want to hurt us. He's not a vengeful God that is out to get us so He can take pleasure in our pain. But He does want us to realize that we are sinners and then we need to turn back to Him. He wants us to realize that something is amiss in our lives. So He allows us to experience the results of our sin, to feel pain and loss, to be tired and weak. He allows such things so that we can understand that we are only human and humbly turn to Him for forgiveness and help. Only when we recognize our misery, only when we acknowledge our sin and weakness, only when we understand our helplessness, do we realize how much we need God.

Indeed, this is the fourth point the psalmist makes: the meaning of life is God. Everything we have and everything we are find meaning only in God, Who created us and sustains us at every moment. If God stopped thinking about us for even an instant, we would simply cease to exist. Yet so often people forget that. The psalmist says, "Surely everyone goes about life like a shadow. Surely for nothing they are in turmoil; they heap up, and do not know who will gather." People spend their lives in half darkness, grasping at fleeting wealth, power, and fame. They build up their fortunes, accumulate possessions, and vigorously try to increase their social standing. They worry about things that will not endure. They are constantly anxious about losing the little bit they've gained and about not having enough. Their priorities are all messed up, and they suffer because of it. The psalmist, on the other hand, knows where he must turn. He says to God, "My hope is in You." Everything rests on God, and the psalmist knows it. Only God gives meaning to life...not possessions, not fame, not wealth, not power. Only God. In Him is all our hope. In Him is all our salvation. In Him is all our true life, both now and in eternity. Our life here on earth lasts for only a little while. As the psalmist says, "For I am Your passing guest..." We must learn to set our hearts on God rather than the passing things of this world.

Life, silence, speech, trials, and true meaning. Psalm 39 is indeed all about perspective, God's perspective.