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Psalm 39: To the choirmaster: to Jeduthun. A Psalm of David

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Psalm 39

To the choirmaster: to Jeduthun. A Psalm of David
(NRSV)

- ¹ I said, "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."
- ² I was silent and still;
I held my peace to no avail;
my distress grew worse,
- ³ my heart became hot within me.
While I mused, the fire burned;
then I spoke with my tongue:
- ⁴ "LORD, let me know my end,
and what is the measure of my days;
let me know how fleeting my life is.
- ⁵ You have made my days a few handbreadths,
and my lifetime is as nothing in your sight.
Surely everyone stands as a mere breath. *Selah*
- ⁶ Surely everyone goes about like a shadow.
Surely for nothing they are in turmoil;
they heap up, and do not know who will gather.
- ⁷ "And now, O Lord, what do I wait for?
My hope is in you.
- ⁸ Deliver me from all my transgressions.
Do not make me the scorn of the fool.
- ⁹ I am silent; I do not open my mouth,
for it is you who have done it.
- ¹⁰ Remove your stroke from me;
I am worn down by the blows of your hand.
- ¹¹ "You chastise mortals
in punishment for sin,
consuming like a moth what is dear to them;
surely everyone is a mere breath. *Selah*
- ¹² "Hear my prayer, O LORD,
and give ear to my cry;
do not hold your peace at my tears.
For I am your passing guest,
an alien, like all my forebears.
- ¹³ Turn your gaze away from me, that I may smile again,
before I depart and am no more."

Psalm 39 can be read as a companion psalm to Psalm 38. The two are similar at several points in both thought and expression. Both compositions tell of the Psalmist's silence during a time of illness; Psalm 38 – of silence before enemies, Psalm 39 of silence before God. Both acknowledge sinfulness, and the belief that afflictions suffered are punishments resulting from sin. Both Psalms express an intense trust in God.

Psalm 39 is a grief-stricken lament. This Psalmist is in deep despair, perhaps induced by an illness (verse 10, the LORD's strokes and blows). But he is resolved to say nothing, particularly in the presence of others, lest he sin by caviling with the LORD (verse 1). But that resolve proved futile; he could keep it in no longer (verses 2-3). He carries his complaint directly to God that life is not only short (verses 4-5), but pointless (verse 6, "for nothing they are in turmoil"). In verses 5-6 he answers his own prayer of verse 4; the similarities of his thoughts to those in Ecclesiastes are quite apparent. He asks for relief (verse 7), even though he is only a passing guest and an alien in this life (verse 12). He asks that the LORD look away from him with his frowning face, so that he might smile again before he dies. In these dark musings, he also discovers a persistent biblical motif, namely, that human illness is God's way not only of teaching us about our mortality, but also of calling us to account for our sins (verse 11).

Unlike most laments, this Psalm does not end with any hint of assurance; the Psalmist seems to have no belief or hope of any meaningful life after death, and expresses no expectation that his prayer will be favorably answered. Nevertheless the Psalmist's faith does not waver. This should be a splendid lesson for us in times of trial.

Prayer to accompany Psalm 39:

Heavenly Father, through your Son you taught us not to fear tomorrow, but to commit our lives to your care. Withhold not your Spirit from us, but help us find a life of peace after these days of trouble; for the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Linger longer over verses 7-8a:

**O Lord, what do I wait for?
My hope is in you.
Deliver me from all my transgressions.**