

Horsley Evangelical Church ([www.horsleyec.org.uk](http://www.horsleyec.org.uk))

Minister: Rev Ken McIntosh 26th July 2020

## Psalm 39 Teach us to number our days aright.

In Psalm 39 we are being taught a right approach to God and a right approach to life. We are to remember that life on this earth is passing, often brief and full of uncertainty and frustrations. This is because we live in a fallen world, a world under the judgement of God that goes back to the early chapters of Genesis. Therefore we must view this life realistically. And we should be humble before God, confessing our sins to him and asking for his help, guidance and mercy. Our hope should be in God and not in men.

It's worth saying that David is not depressed when he writes this Psalm. He is not taking a negative and depressive view of life, but rather he is taking a realistic view. And at the end of this Psalm David reminds all believers that we are strangers and aliens in this world, but through Jesus Christ we belong to another - a better and eternal world which God promises his people.

The title tells us this is a *Psalm of David* which is *for Jeduthun*. Jeduthun was one of three choir leaders that David chose for the temple worship. And this reminds us that our Psalm would have been sung in the temple and was intended to help God's people when they came to worship. As we worship the Lord then we are to humble ourselves before him, confess our sins and remember that we are but a passing breath. At the same time however, the worshipper knows they belong to the world to come and therefore has hope.

We look at the Psalm this morning under four headings. In verses 1-3 we have **the agony of silent waiting**. **Read verses 1-3**. We do not know for certain what is going on here, what is the *background* to the Psalm. So I can only offer one interpretation. Later on we learn that David is under the Lord's discipline. **Read verse 10, 11**. Like Psalm 38, it would seem that King David has sinned against the Lord and the Lord has rebuked his servant. We are not told what David has done to displease the Lord. But probably the Lord's discipline of David has made him ill, seriously ill, and there is even talk of the king dying.

Now in verse 1 David has resolved to put *a muzzle on his mouth* as long as the wicked are in his presence. But why has David decided to keep silent in this way? One possibility is that his silence was an expression of David's acceptance of the Lord's discipline. He knew had done wrong and that the Lord was chastening him in love. So David's silence was part of his self-humbling under the hand of God which had come *against him*. So we read in verse 9 – **read verse 9**. This illness was from the Lord. But David humbled himself before God. He did not complain or protest. He accepted the Lord's fatherly discipline.

But another reason for David's silence was that the wicked were in his presence (1). David did not want to say anything which would dishonour the Lord in the presence of some whom he describes as wicked (1). David did not want to say anything which he knew certain men would twist and use to their advantage. The king knew he had to be careful what he said in the presence of the wicked. And this was another reason for David being silent and still.

But this proved to be very difficult. As David kept silent, he found that his anguish and his anger only increased. His heart grew hot and the fire burned within him. Again, it's difficult to say with certainty why this was. But it may have been because of what the wicked were saying. David was provoked by their words and behaviour. Did they speculate perhaps on the *reasons* for the king's illness? Did they assume the king would die from his illness and were they making plans for their own advantage? It's difficult to say. But clearly David was finding it very hard to keep silent, to refrain from saying something he might later regret.

Have you ever been in such a situation? You are in a position of weakness. Perhaps we are not feeling well. It may even be because of the Lord's loving discipline - although we should be very careful in thinking that. But we are provoked by people. And we are finding it hard not to speak our mind, which we know would be an unwise thing to do. **The agony of silent waiting.**

But then secondly we consider **the frailty of human life**, in verses 4-7. **Read verses 4-7.** Again, the interpretation of these verses is not easy or obvious. But what we can say is that the frustration David felt in keeping silent before men is helped by him speaking to God and pouring out his heart to the Lord. The Bible is clear that there is never any need to bottle things up before the Lord. Indeed we are commanded not to do this. Speak to the Lord. Tell him all about it.

What is David asking for in verse 4? **Read verse 4 again.** He is probably asking the Lord for a fresh understanding and acceptance of the fact that his life is passing and fragile. David could simply be asking the Lord if he is going to die from this illness. If that is what some were saying - that the king was going to die, David may be asking the Lord if he is indeed going to die soon. But it's probably more than that. David seems to be asking that he might humbly accept that in this world, life is fragile and brief. And that's an important thing to understand and accept, isn't it. If we don't accept it, we lay ourselves open to all sorts of disappointment and frustration. Be realistic about the nature of life in this world. It's transient.

And yet David already does have *some* appreciation of this. **Read verse 5.** David has been made to feel afresh the brevity and weakness of his life because of his illness. But he knows in fact that the life of all men is fragile. And compared with God, our life is nothing. The span of David's years are as nothing before the God who is eternal. David himself, as all men, is nothing before almighty God. And it's very important to remember this when we come to worship God. Before him, we are just a passing breeze. Remember the greatness of the one you worship and by comparison we are merely a breath.

These words take us to the very heart of the Psalm. Man is as nothing before God. God gives life to all his creatures, but because of the Genesis curse, life in this world is brief, transitory and often weak.

And we need to remember that when we come to worship the Lord. Be humble before him who holds your tiny life in his hands. He can create and he can destroy. Each man's life is but a breath, a vapour. It is here only for a moment and then it vanishes. In one sense, there is no substance to it.

Now we must be careful at this point. For this Psalm is *not* teaching us that human life is *without meaning*. Human life *does* have meaning. The Lord gives the gift of life and scrutinises every person's life. Everything is noted and everything is significant. And at the end of our life on this earth, God will bring everything we have done into judgement. He will weigh up and assess every person's life. Life therefore has meaning.

Nor does this Psalm teach us that human life is *worthless*. No, human beings have been made in God's image. We therefore have great dignity and worth. And even after 'the fall' when sin entered the world, man's life still has dignity. The sanctity of human life is not removed. We still have great worth and great value as human beings.

Nevertheless, in this world man's life is but a breath. Man is a mere phantom as he goes to and fro. And it reminds us primarily that compared to God we are as nothing. It reminds us of the greatness of God our creator. And yes, it also reminds us that life in world is under the curse of God. Things are now very different from what they were at the beginning, before man sinned. After the fall, God's curse fell on humanity and that judgement is still with us. Man is subject to die, and his life is characterised by weakness and frustration.

And it's good to remember this as we worship the Lord. Listen to three other Scriptures reminding us of the same thing. [Read Psalm 90:9-12](#). Here is something to remember as you come before the Lord. [Read Isaiah 40:6-8](#). [Read James 4:13-16](#).

See how David also speaks about the foolish boasting of men in verse 6. [Read verse 6 again](#). David comments on the constant activity of men, who assume that by their own efforts they can do whatever they want without reference to God!

Now, it's good to be busy and work and to have aims. But the simple point is that if you do this without any regard for God and dependence on God, it is folly. What does all the busyness produce ultimately? It will not last. Nor will your life. Man heaps up wealth not really knowing why he does it or indeed who will get it. Who knows if God will allow the person with money to enjoy it. How does the person know whether God will give them the time or the health to spend the money? Remember the parable Jesus taught. [Read Luke 12:16-21](#).

Life is short. God determines how long a man's life will be. And then what? Then you face God on the day of judgement. And then what? The key verse of the Psalm is found in verse 7. [Read verse 7](#). Given the nature of life on this earth, what is the wise thing to do? Put your hope in God. Seek him. "My hope" says David "is in God. There is nothing in this passing world worth holding on to. There is nothing I *can* hold on to - except God." Where is your hope this morning? Where is your treasure? David is telling us something important here. [Read verse 7](#).

**The agony of silent waiting, the frailty of human life**, then in verses 8-11 we find **the acknowledgment of personal sin**. [Read verse 8-11](#). David here is acknowledging his own sin before the Lord. And it's part of putting your hope in God. Because of the brevity and weakness of human life, we had better be sure we have peace with God. We had better be sure that our sins have been forgiven.

We are not sure what sin David has committed that has brought about God's rebuke, but David confesses his sin. He does not deny he has sinned against God. He does not protest that the Lord has been unjust towards him in discipline. But as David hopes in the Lord, he asks him for mercy. He asks the Lord to save him from his transgressions. He asks the Lord to save him from the scorn and schemes of the wicked. And he asks the Lord to temper his judgement with mercy. "Lord do not treat me as my sins deserve. Your hand is heavy upon me."

It's interesting that although David fully acknowledges his sin here, he does not see himself as one of 'the wicked' in verse 1. His life is not set on a course of sin as theirs is. And David is truly sorry for his sin. There is this same phrase in verse 11 – each man is but a breath. And David is reminding the Lord that he is a mere breath – that the Lord might go easy on him! And it's interesting that there is another reference to men's wealth being consumed by the Lord (11). Just as silently as a moth eats and destroys a piece of cloth, so the Lord can take away a man's wealth if he chooses. And one wonders if this has been part of David's discipline. Has the Lord taken away some of his wealth? Has this ever happened to you? What is the Lord teaching you?

**The acknowledgment of personal sin**. How important when worshippers come together that we acknowledge our sin before the Lord. But how wonderful to remember the verses we shall consider this evening. [Read 1 John 1:8, 9](#).

**The agony of silent waiting, the frailty of human life, the acknowledgment of personal sin**. But then finally **the hope of a new world** in verses 12, 13. [Read verse 12, 13](#). Verse 13 repeats the pleas of verses 8 and 10 for the Lord's mercy in David's present suffering. But verse 12 is interesting, for in it David implies his hope is for a new world. David says something similar in 1 Chronicles 29:15. [Read 1 Chronicles 29:15](#).

Abraham referred to himself as a *stranger* in the land and an *alien*. God had given Abraham great and precious promises of descendants and of land. And yet Abraham never really saw the fulfilment of these promises. His life was one of pilgrimage. Abraham thought of himself as an alien and a stranger who was always travelling towards the promised land.

And that is true of all Abraham's descendants. We are all *pilgrims* in this world travelling to the promised land. And yet David says that he *dwells with the Lord* as an alien. David doesn't belong to this world, but he belongs to the Lord as he travels on to the next.

This present world is characterised by man's frailty and life's brevity. But this world is not our home. This world is subject to decay, weakness and frustration. But this is not our home. We are aliens and strangers here. Our hope is in God and in what God has promised us. For the Lord has promised us a new world where his curse is removed and where life is no longer characterised by weakness and brevity. And it is this new world that David longs for and which we long for.

And it was the Lord Jesus Christ who came to establish the eternal kingdom of God and purchase for us the forgiveness of sins and the eternal life that we long for. Hear these words from Hebrews as we draw to a close this morning. [Read Hebrews 11:9,10,13-16](#). And in that city, that eternal city, there is abundant life. [Read Revelation 21:3,4](#). The description in this Psalm of man being a phantom and his life being like a breath is part of the *old order of things*. But one day a new order will come, and every true believer will be part of this eternal and glorious order.

David doesn't belong to the old order, neither did Abraham, neither do you if you are a Christian. This world is not your home. Your citizenship is in heaven and we eagerly expect a Saviour from there. And when he comes, he will take us to be with him in the eternal home.

The discipline, whether it is David's or ours, is preparing us for this new home, for it is the home of righteousness. And this is what we hope for. David does not write this Psalm as a depressed person. He is describing reality in this present world. It is subject to decay and has been cut short by the effects of the fall. But God sent his Son Jesus Christ into this fallen world, in order to die on a cross and redeem us that we may have a place in the eternal life to come.

Is this your hope? This life is transitory and frail. But we hope for an eternal home with our God our Saviour. And this is what we must remember as we come to worship God.