

A Mere Breath

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[0:00] To the choir master, to Jedithan, who was an individual actually.! You can find his name in other places, in 1 Chronicles especially.! He is the choir master that's being addressed here in Psalm 39, just so that you know.

It's a person. To the choir master, to Jedithan, a Psalm of David. I said I will guard my ways that I may not sin with my tongue. I will guard my mouth with a muzzle so long as the wicked are in my presence.

I was mute and silent. I held my peace to no avail, and my distress grew worse. My heart became hot within me as I mused the fire burned.

Then I spoke with my tongue. O Lord, make me know my end, and what is the measure of my days? Let me know how fleeting I am.

Behold, you have made my days a few handbreadths. My lifetime is as nothing before you. Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath.

[1:09] Selah. Surely a man goes about as a shadow. Surely for nothing they are in turmoil. Man heaps up wealth and does not know who will gather.

And now, O Lord, for what do I wait? My hope is in you. Deliver me from all my transgressions. Do not make me the scorn of the fool.

I'm mute. I do not open my mouth. For it is you who have done it. Remove your stroke from me. I'm spent by the hostility of your hand.

When you discipline a man with rebukes for sin, you consume like a moth what is dear to him. Surely all mankind is a mere breath.

Selah. Hear my prayer, O Lord. Give ear to my cry. Hold not your peace at my tears. For I am a sojourner with you, a guest like all my fathers.

[2:13] Look away from me that I may smile again before I depart and am no more. Amen.

Ashlyn's first school project this year was an interesting one.

She was required to research a bit of our family's history and then give a presentation to the rest of her class about that history, even bringing an artifact that represented well our heritage.

And she chose to focus on the Blankenship side of the family. And honestly, it was a lot of fun actually to sit with her for a few days and reflect a little bit on our heritage, how the Lord has shaped our present family by our past.

It was fun, honestly, to ask my dad some questions, for dad to give us a little bit of insight into that. She took, as her artifact for our family, she took some coal to her classroom.

If you've ever been to our house, you'll notice in the corner of the driveway there's a huge block of coal. All of the Blankenships in my family have that. My dad and my brother and my sister and me, different places in our house where we put it on display.

[3:26] It's because all of our family is coal miners. That's where we come from in a little coal village called Man, Man, West Virginia. They're real creative with their names. It's where the men lived, I guess.

It's just a coal village. There's really not much to it. It sits right on next door to the Hatfield and McCoys where that great feud took place. So she takes a little piece of coal.

This is who we are. We really couldn't go back very far, honestly. She began her presentation with my grandfather, Leo Blankenship. She wrote her presentation writing about someone that she actually has never even known.

She never got to meet my grandfather. He died in 2006. I was in college. Julie and I were just beginning to date. He lived 73 years on this earth.

This feels like a long time, doesn't it? All Ashlyn knows of him is just a few anecdotes and pictures that Dad and I passed along.

[4:32] The truth is, is that her children probably won't even remember his name. He lived.

He died. Soon enough, he'll be forgotten. And that's the case for each and every one of us, isn't it? We're here for a little while. Then we're gone. Soon we're forgotten. Everything we've worked for, someone else will come through and take it, share it, use it.

Psalm 39 calls for us each to meditate on the problem of our mortality. Indeed, it is a significant problem, isn't it?

Death is not only a fact of life, it is the greatest evil of life. Life is brief and it's hard.

[5:33] And there's absolutely nothing that we can do to change that. God himself has made it so. Job says it this way in Job 14 as he's crying out in his own anguish, similar to David's, man who is born of woman, that is, all of us, is of few days and they are full of trouble.

The brevity of life and its implications are the dominant theme of this song. There's two nearly identical reflections.

They're marked reflection points. They're marked by this term, Selah. Perhaps you're familiar with that. We think it's probably a term, maybe it's a musical term, but it's meant to cause reflection for everything to pause before you go any further in the song, any further in the prayer, any further in the meditation.

Just stop and think about what has just been said. There's two of them. They're nearly identical.

The first one is in verse 5 where David says, surely all mankind stands as a mere breath.

He repeats it again, another reflection point. Psalm, in verse 11, he says, surely all mankind is a mere breath. A breath, David says.

[6:54] That's your life. That's my life. But the brevity and the vanity of human life doesn't mean that we are without hope.

Yes, our mortality is a serious problem. We cannot change it, but it's not a problem for God. And what David does in this meditation is not only lament the issue.

He's not only lamenting his distress and the discipline of the Lord and the inevitability of his own death and his mortality. He's not just lamenting it. He's pointing us forward to a solution.

And the psalm's interesting in that it provides a preface before he actually gets to the prayer. The preface is in the first three verses. Just look at them again with me.

I said, I will guard my ways that I may not sin with my tongue. I will guard my mouth with a muzzle so long as the wicked are in my presence.

[8:04] I was mute and silent. I held my peace to no avail with no success. And my distress, it grew worse. And as it grew worse, my heart became hot within me as affections are being stirred and anger and frustration and disappointment.

As I mused, the fire burned. And then he spoke when he had to. It was about to burst in him as he contemplated what was happening.

David is in a season of distress. He's determined to be silent lest he sin against God with his tongue. That determination is then intensified as he says, not only am I not interested in sinning against God in the way that I respond to the distress that he has brought my way, but I especially don't want to do that before the wicked and the unfaithful and the enemies who have surrounded me and are watching me.

I will go so far as to muzzle my mouth to prevent myself from sinning against God in their presence, becoming the object of their scorn. And what we discover in the prayer itself is that his distress that he's sensing as he's setting the scene for us ultimately comes from God's discipline.

It is God who has distressed him. It is God who is ultimately responsible for the pain that he was enduring. And his silence then is rooted in his understanding that God has done it.

[9:47] Look again at verse 9. He reiterates, I am mute. I do not open my mouth for it is you who have done it. His silence then is rooted in the fear of God.

He trembles before God as Andy read in Psalm 99. Let all the earth tremble before him. David himself trembles here before the Lord.

He does not answer. It's rooted in the fear of God. Which tells us that if he were to speak, why is it that he's determined to be silent? That if he were to speak in the context of this Psalm, what that speaking would be was murmuring against the Lord for what he had done.

Despising the work of the Lord that he was carrying out in David's life. Charging him perhaps with some injustice against David as his servant and as his king.

And David is determined that he will not do that. But the trouble is that silence didn't make the problem go away.

[10:56] It perhaps prevented him from sinning with his tongue, but it didn't make the reality of his mortality go away. It didn't make the discipline of the Lord that was driving him to meditate on his mortality go away.

In fact, he says it actually just gets worse in verse 3. It got worse for me as I mused on it.

This became like a fire burning within me. And ultimately, he says, I held my peace to no avail. I was silent, determined to be silent without success.

Eventually, I had to speak. As it was boiling up within me, I had to cry out to the Lord. And eventually, that's exactly what he does. But what is it that so troubled David that caused this burning in his heart that caused him to cry out to the Lord?

The hand of the Lord's discipline was heavy on him so that it forced him to meditate on the problem of his mortality. That God had made him a mere breath.

[12:05] Now, it's verses 4 to 13 that actually record the prayer itself. And the prayer is instructive for us. Not only do we want to enter into this meditation, joining it with David as we're contemplating the reality of what he's contemplating, we also want to follow his pattern.

When God's hand of discipline forces us to consider the brevity and the vanity of life, there's three ways David teaches us to pray here.

First, ask God for wisdom. Ask God for wisdom. The kind of wisdom that understands our trouble so that we might then fear God.

This prayer in verse 4, it begins in a surprising way. David is asking for God to teach him a lesson. Look at what he says. Oh, Lord, make me know my end.

And what is the measure of my days? Let me know how fleeting I am. It's surprising, isn't it? When you're considering the preface and the context, the scene that David has laid, it's almost as if, well, why in the world did he start there?

[13:19] Where is that coming from? It's fundamentally a request to know, to know. Make me know the measure of my days.

Make me know my end. But he isn't asking God to reveal a set of data about when and where and how he would die.

That's not what this request is. This isn't about knowing how many days you have left. It's coming to terms with the fact that it's not very many. That's what he's asking.

He wants to grasp the reality of his mortality and God's role in his mortality such that it shapes the way that he lives. It shapes the way that he thinks in that present moment.

So as he's struggling with this distress that God has put him under, as God has forced him to think about the reality of his own mortality, his first request is, Lord, teach me wisdom in this.

[14:21] Teach me wisdom. Make me know my end. Help me grasp it and all its implications. The emphasis here is on the brevity of life.

God has caused the span of our lives to be but a few handbreadths, David says. Verse 5. Behold, you've made my days a few handbreadths.

My lifetime is as nothing before you. Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath. Brevity is the emphasis. Handbreadths.

That's an ancient unit of measurement. It's literally the breadth of your hand, about four inches or so. David says, if my life could be measured that way, it would just be a few inches long.

He says, as I stand before you, as I stand relative to the eternal God, my life is nothing. It's literally nothing. All of us are just a mere breath, he says.

[15:27] Now, it's always good to consider how a text would be understood by its initial audience. In this case, that audience, of course, is ancient Israel.

They didn't read in their ESVs. They heard in their Hebrew Bibles. Jim Hamilton does a really, really good job, a helpful job of pointing out that David is employing a play on words with this phrase.

What we're reading as, surely all mankind stands as a mere breath. And then again in verse 11.

Surely all mankind is a mere breath. What we're reading as that in English is literally this in Hebrew. Surely able stands every atom. Surely able every atom stands. In verse 11. Surely every able every atom.

Those are names, aren't they? There is a depth of meaning in the Hebrew language that is difficult to convey in English. It's not that your English translation is wrong.

[16 : 31] It's just English is different than Hebrew. When an ancient Israelite would have heard this read or would have sung this song or heard it sung in the temple worship, his mind's immediately going to the book of Genesis.

His mind is immediately going to Adam. Our mortality, he will think, comes from Adam whose sin brought death into the world.

And the brevity of our lives is then illustrated by Abel, young Abel, murdered by his brother Cain. His life was short.

What is it that David is communicating? Because of sin, because we're in Adam, we are all mortal as Adam was mortal.

But all of our lives is like Abel's. It's brief. It's short. But it's here that we can begin to discern just the first glimmer of hope in the psalm.

[17 : 35] If you're just willing to go a little bit beyond the psalm, to think of its great fulfillment, you'll begin to see even in this language, there's hope here in David's language. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, Our mortality then, the reality of our death, it comes from the fact that we are all in Adam.

But for all who are in Christ, the greater Adam, the true and better Adam, there is life beyond this death. There is a promise of resurrection hidden here in this language.

To be in Adam only requires that you be born. To be in Christ, in Jesus' language, requires that you be born again.

And the fruit of that new birth is repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, which will be demonstrated later in this psalm. Here's the point. Our only hope is the greater Adam who conquered our sin, who conquered our death.

And we need wisdom from God to understand that. We need wisdom from God to understand why we die, why our days are filled with trouble, and where our hope actually comes from.

[19 : 11] Life is brief. Beyond the meditation of life's brevity is a statement on life's vanity. Verse 6.

After this reflection point, David says, Surely a man goes about as a shadow. Surely for nothing we are in turmoil.

And then he describes the turmoil. Man heaps up wealth and does not know who will gather. This is similar to the writer of Ecclesiastes, isn't it?

Who spoke of the vanity of vanities. Spend all this time toiling and working and providing and death is inevitable. Someone else is going to come and enjoy it.

David is reflecting on the same thing here. He speaks of how many of us waste what little time we do have. Toiling for wealth and pleasure that someone else will enjoy.

[20 : 17] Oh, how we're tempted and we tend to live for this life. Only to be quickly taken out of it and for someone else to come and take what we have gathered and left behind.

The text is in some sense rebuking those who live primarily for self with little regard for the God who rules our days.

David says that's foolish. It's foolish to live that way. His request then is that God would give him wisdom as he meditates on his own mortality so that he does not live that way.

We do well to remember what James says here. It's almost a commentary on this passage in James chapter 4. He says, Come now, you who say today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make profit.

And yet you don't know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? James asks. It appears for a moment you're just a mist.

[21 : 27] You're here and then it vanishes away. And he says, Instead, you ought to say if the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that. But as it is, your boast is arrogant.

And all such boasting is evil. That's what David has in mind here. Lord, help me know my end so that I will live in the fear of you.

Help me know my end so that I will live in wisdom, not sin against you. He's asking that God would help him not to be like those whom James rebuked.

He's asking God to teach so that he will fear him. Similar to what Moses asked for in Psalm 90. Moses writes, The years of our life are 70.

Or even by reason of strength, 80. Yet their span is but toil and trouble. They're gone. We fly away. And then he asks, Who considers the power of your anger and your wrath according to the fear of you?

[22:35] Moses says, Who actually takes the time to stop and consider their mortality and think that God is sovereign over this mortality? This is a result of his judgment.

This is God's anger here so that they would live in fear. And then he says, Lord, so teach us to number our days so that we may get a heart of wisdom.

God has put David in distress. We're going to see in a moment it's in relationship to his own sin. He is being disciplined by the hand of the Lord. The strong hand of the Lord is forcing him to meditate on his own insignificance.

His nothingness. And the brevity of his own life. And the first thing he does as he pours his heart out to the Lord in this distress is say, Lord, help me know my end. Help me know where my hope can be found.

And help me live in wisdom now. But there's a second thing. He declares his hope in God for salvation.

[23:39] Declare your hope in God for salvation. We find this in verses 7 to 11. It seems that in this section of the prayer, what has caused David to meditate on his mortality is God's hand of discipline.

It is for sin that David suffers. And we're told God's discipline is severe. It consumes everything dear to the sinner.

And finally, his life. Look at verses 8 to 11. Deliver me from all my transgressions, David cries. Do not make me the scorn of the fool.

You can meditate on this later, but there's another play on words here. Fool here is another proper name. It's the name Nabal. You can read about Nabal in the Old Testament with David and the fool that he was as he sought to scorn God's king.

He says, do not make me the scorn of the fool. I'm mute. I do not open my mouth. It's you who have done it. This is your discipline. I will not argue with you, God. I will not complain against you.

[24:50] This is your work in my life, but I would ask that you remove your stroke from me because I'm spent by the hostility of your hand. And then he considers, when you discipline a man with rebukes for sin, you consume him like a moth.

What is dear to him? Now, moth could be a reference to what moths do. Destroy your clothes. They just eat them away. They corrupt.

It could be just the weakness and vulnerability of the moth itself. If you've ever had one on the side of your car or the side of your house, and you've gone and you've swiped your hand, not intending maybe to harm it, but to get it to move.

And its wings just disintegrates in front of you. David says, that's how I feel when you discipline me. God's discipline is severe.

If verses 4 to 6 contemplate the reality of man's mortality and the brevity of life, verses 8 to 11 consider the reason for man's mortality.

[26:00] All mankind is a mere breath because all mankind stands guilty before the holy God. Now, that's important to understand if we're going to understand the hope that's here.

The hope's in verse 7. Verse 7 is actually the pivotal moment of the psalm. It's central in the psalm's literary structure, but it's also the focal point of the prayer that David prays.

Notice what he says, verse 7. And now, O Lord, for what do I wait? In other words, where will I find a solution? Where am I looking for this problem of mortality to be fixed?

Where am I looking for this issue of my distress to be resolved? And then he declares, my hope is in you. It's in you, Lord.

The good news of the psalm is that a solution does indeed exist. His confidence is in the mercy and steadfast love of the Lord, which God has promised again and again and again for all who will love and fear him.

[27:16] Paradoxically, David declares his hope in the one who has done it. I hope in you and I will be silent because you're responsible for this.

You are doing this to me. You have made it so. But he doesn't charge God with injustice. No, he clings to God in hope of mercy.

He knows that the God of justice who rightly judges his sin is also the God of mercy. And it is this hope that actually enables his prayer.

It is for hope that he asks God to deliver him from all of his transgressions, meaning the sins themselves and also their consequences, leading ultimately to his own death.

It's for hope that he pleads for God to remove the hostility of his hand. The second line of verse 8 shows that what's even foremost in David's mind is ultimate deliverance, an ultimate deliverance that prevents the fool from making a mockery of those who put their trust in God.

[28 : 30] This is a prayer for salvation. It's a prayer for salvation to the only God who can supply it. And that's where the believer's hope rests.

It rests in God himself. It hopes in God himself that God will do this, that he will deliver, that he will provide a way for David to actually receive life and that he will show himself merciful once again. But there's a third thing. He asks God for wisdom in a sense, wisdom to actually understand so that he might fear the Lord.

He declares his hope in God. He recognizes his sinful condition and this judgment is a result of his own sin, but he declares that my hope is in the Lord God.

And then moving on from there, he does one more thing. He's hoping in an ultimate sense, but now he prays and cries out for relief in this life.

[29 : 46] Verses 12 and 13. Listen to the cry. Hear, O Lord, my prayer. Give ear to my cry.

There's a mirror here of the first three verses. Earlier, David said, I held my peace to no avail and now he pleads for God not to hold his peace. Don't be silent to my tears, he says, verse 12.

I'm a sojourner with you. I'm a guest like all my fathers. Look away from me so that I can smile.

Look away from me so that I can have joy.

Look away from me so that I can have pleasure once again before my life is over. And I depart and am no more. What's he doing?

He's crying out for merciful relief now. And that's instructive for us, isn't it? You know it's okay to go to the God who disciplines you and say, Lord, please bring me relief.

[30 : 54] Turn away your anger so that I can smile again. Seeks for relief for whatever time the singer has remaining.

He trusts God for ultimate salvation and now he seeks relief from God's discipline. It's a cry that God won't be silent to his tears.

Again, God's discipline is severe. David asked that he would turn it away so that he can experience joy. It's a somber note. But it's not without hope.

Begin at verse 12, the second part. This language is important. He says, Hear my cry for I'm a sojourner with you and a guest like all my fathers.

You know what a sojourner is and a guest in the context of the Bible. It's someone who temporarily dwells here but doesn't actually belong here. We thought about that in great detail as we were studying through 1 Peter earlier in the year, didn't we?

[32 : 04] David says, I'm a sojourner here with you, God. I'm a guest like all my fathers. It's not only speaking to the brevity of life, he's recognizing that this world is not his ultimate home.

This is not his ultimate resting place. This is coming out of the wisdom that he's gained earlier in the prayer. It's coming out of the hope that he understands in the middle of the prayer.

And now he's reflecting on the fact that this isn't all that there is. I'm a sojourner here. I'm a guest.

But he says that he's a sojourner and guest like all my fathers, which is almost certainly a reference to the patriarchs.

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all referred to in the Bible as sojourners. Why? Because that's literally what they were. They sojourned in a land that was promised to them but one that they did not yet possess.

David writes as the king of Israel during a time when Israel did possess the land that God had promised and yet he still considered himself to be a sojourner like the patriarchs.

[33 : 15] Why? Why would he use this language? Because he knew that Canaan pointed forward to that heavenly land of promise in the new creation.

He's looking for a greater Canaan, a greater promised land that God has set apart for his people.

He was a journeyman in this life just as Abraham was in Canaan and his request was that God would give him relief from his discipline as he journeyed but his hope rested on the promise of eternal life beyond this fleeting life.

Now there's hope there because what David prays there, what he insists upon there is true for all of us who are in Christ. Indeed like David, we may face the heavy discipline of the Lord in this life but this life is not all there is for us.

We are sojourners with God here. We are a guest here like David. We're a guest here like the patriarchs. We're longing for a greater rest but in this time we come to the Lord and David teaches us to cry out for relief.

Lord, would you just turn your face away so that I can smile? Now why would we feel like we're allowed to pray that? It is this hope of what is to come that prompts us to pray this way.

[34 : 44] If we know that God will grant us mercy in eternity, why would we not seek mercy now? If God will be full of steadfast love then, then surely he is full of steadfast love.

Now. David teaches us to cry out for that relief as we're trusting him to bring us home.

So where's actually the solution in the psalm? We're told that the hope is in God. We're not told exactly how God provides the hope. the promise is fulfilled in the person and the work of Jesus Christ.

Jesus, of course, we see this in all the psalms. Jesus is the true and better David. He fulfills the psalms. In a sense, he's, as Augustine said, he is the preeminent singer of the psalms.

And surely, Jesus embodies in its fullness everything that David is going through here in this psalm. He embodies the silent sufferer who continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly, who refused to sin with his tongue in the midst of his suffering.

[36 : 09] Jesus embodies the perfect wisdom of one who knows to number their days and live for the glory of God and with wisdom in this life. He does it perfectly.

Even more, he understood the agony of God's judgment as our sin bearer. When David says, when you discipline a man with rebukes for sin, it's like a moth.

You strip away everything. When we look to the cross, what do we see? We talked about this in great detail last week, didn't we? What do we see there? we see a full emptying of Christ.

The Father reserves nothing of his wrath when he pours it out on his son. He knows the agony of what it means to truly suffer for sin.

And he does so in our place. The heart of the gospel in Psalm 39 is that Jesus actually did everything necessary to solve the problem that David has here.

[37 : 21] God does indeed turn his wrath away from his people for those who fear him. He does give us an unspeakable joy as Peter called it.

Not only in the next life, but one that can be our true experience in this life. But God does not do that by turning a blind eye to our sin. That's not how he does it.

When God turns away from us, it requires him to turn toward Christ so that everything that should be poured out on us in judgment for our sin is not ignored.

It's poured out on Christ for us in our place. Jesus doesn't pray this as a sinner.

He prays this as one in whom we have real union. As we said last week, such that his suffering represented in this psalm was a real legitimate suffering.

[38 : 30] He really felt that guilt. He really felt that humiliation. He really felt our judgment. because he did not merely represent our sin as we said last week like a shirt with our sins written on it.

No, he was made to be sin. That solves the problem of our mortality at least in the sense of its reason. He suffers the death that we deserve to die.

But it doesn't stop there. The gospel hope of Psalm 39 is that God raises Jesus from the dead after disciplining him for sin.

David's hope here is ultimately a hope of resurrection. Therefore, just as in Adam all of us are mortal, all of us are sinners, all of us are deserving of God's judgment, those of us who are in Christ will be made alive because he is alive.

Not only are we in union with him in his death, we are in union with him in his life. Jesus then is the solution to the problem of Psalm 39.

[39 : 59] So then, what do we do when God's hand of discipline is so heavy that it forces us to consider our own mortality? Well, we ask God for wisdom.

We ask him for wisdom so that we might grasp the gospel truth that is in this whole scenario and learn to fear him. And then we declare our hope in him for he is a God of great mercy and we look to the cross to see that mercy on display.

And then we cry out to him for relief, confessing our sins, trusting that he really does care for us and therefore we can cast our cares on him, even the ones that he has produced as a result of our sin. Let's pray. may!