

Psalm 39

Office of Readings Wednesday Week 2

The psalmist is facing death. He tries to restrain himself but cannot, and bursts into a cry to YHWH for respite. It is a tragic reflection on the human condition. The tension is not resolved and the reflection is indecisive. Its key theme is expressed in the refrain: 'We human beings ('ādām) are no more than a mere breath (hebel)' (verses 5 and 11). It has a certain affinity with Qohelet [Ecclesiastes].

The living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no more reward, and even the memory of them is lost.

– Qohelet 9:5

There are parallels also in Job, as we shall note at the conclusion of the commentary. See also the following:

Those of low estate are but a breath, those of high estate are a delusion; placed together on a balances up they go; they are lighter than a breath.

– Psalm 62:9

We are like a breath; our days are like a passing shadow.

– Psalm 144:4

The title reads: 'To the leader: to Jeduthun. A Psalm* of David'. Jeduthun was a singer in David's court (1Chronicles 16:41).

The opening verses are in the form of a monologue which express an internal struggle: should I speak or be silent?

¹I said to myself: 'I will keep watch over my conduct so as not to sin* with my tongue; I will keep a muzzle on my mouth as long as the wicked are in my presence.'

It is not clear exactly what it is that is troubling the psalmist. Compare the following:

Who will set a guard over my mouth and an effective seal upon my lips, so that I may not fall because of them, and my tongue may not destroy me?

– Sirach 22:27

A person may make a slip without intending it. Who has not sinned with his tongue?

– Sirach 19:16

To watch over mouth and tongue is to keep out of trouble.

– Proverbs 21:23

**²I was silent, resigned. I contained myself, but to no avail; my distress grew worse,
³my heart* was burning within me. While I was talking to myself, the fire blazed. I could no longer hold my tongue.**

Compare the following:

If I say, 'I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,' then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.

– Jeremiah 20:9

The psalmist recognises that his personal failure is part of the human condition. He knows in general terms that life is fleeting, but seems to want to know how much longer he has to live.

‘We human beings’ in verse five translates the Hebrew *’ādām*, [אָדָם] meaning humankind, as in the story of the creation. ‘Breath’ translates the Hebrew *hebel* [הֶבֶל], the name given to the brother of Cain in the Bible story. We human beings are here for a brief moment, and our life is over like a sigh, like a passing breath that is here one moment and gone the next. Compare the following:

Whatever comes from earth returns to earth; so the ungodly go from curse to destruction. The human body is a fleeting thing.

– Sirach 41:10-11

Even if we live seventy years, or even eighty, if we are strong; life is only toil and trouble; they years soon pass and off we fly.

– Psalm 90:10

They reasoned unsoundly, saying to themselves: Short and sorrowful is our life, and there is no remedy when a life comes to its end, and no one has been known to return from Hades. For we were born by mere chance, and hereafter we shall be as though we had never been, for the breath in our nostrils is smoke, and reason is a spark kindled by the beating of our hearts; when it is extinguished, the body will turn to ashes, and the spirit will dissolve like empty air. Our name will be forgotten in time, and no one will remember our works; our life will pass away like the traces of a cloud, and be scattered like mist that is dispersed by the rays of the sun and overcome by its heat. For our allotted time is the passing of a shadow, and there is no return from our death, because it is sealed up and no one turns back.

– Wisdom 2:1-5

Hard work was created for everyone, and a heavy yoke is laid on the children of Adam, from the day they come forth from their mother’s womb until the day they return to the mother of all the living. Perplexities and fear of heart are theirs, and anxious thought of the day of their death.

– Sirach 40:1-2

Similar sentiments are expressed by Lucretius in his ‘*De rerum natura*’ III, 233,246,455-456.

⁴YHWH*, let me know my end, the measure of my years, that I may know how fleeting my life is.

⁵You have given me only a short span of life, and my days are as nothing in your sight.

We human beings last no longer than a mere breath.

[Selah*]

⁶I will pass away like a shadow. We worry over nothing. We amass possessions, but for whom?

Sin and punishment

The rest of the psalm focuses on sin and punishment. We find a reflection followed by a request, followed by a further reflection and a further request, and concluding with a reflection. Once again we are confronted by a dilemma: Do I speak to God, do I speak with God or do I remain silent? The tension remains: is it a matter of acceptance or resignation?

⁷So what am I waiting* for? Lord, my hope* is in you.

⁸Free me from all my transgressions*. Do not make me the scorn of the fool.

⁹I am silent; I do not open my mouth. Since it is you who have done it.

¹⁰Take away from me your stroke; I am worn down by the blows of your hand.

¹¹You chastise us in our guilt*, consuming like a moth what is dear to us.

We human beings are no more than a mere breath.
[Selah*]

¹²Hear my prayer, YHWH, attend to my cry; do not be deaf to my tears. For I am your guest, a stranger passing by, like all who have gone before me.

¹³Turn your gaze away from me, give me the breath of life, before I depart and am no more.

Tragically, his focus here is on himself rather than on God and so his hope is fragile because of his human transgressions, the guilt of which lies heavily upon him. Verse nine picks up the silence of verse two.

The psalmist sees God as the source of the condition in which he finds himself, and so looks to God to change things. Compare:

Come, let us return to YHWH; for it is he who has torn, and he will heal us; he has struck down, and he will bind us up.

– Hosea 6:1

I wound and I heal; and no one can deliver from my hand.

– Deuteronomy 32:39

Your hands fashioned and made me; and now you turn and destroy me. Remember that you fashioned me like clay; and will you turn me to dust again?

– Job 10:8-9

I will punish their transgression with the rod and their guilt with scourges.

– Psalm 89:32

The second half of verse eleven repeats the theme first presented in verse five.

The psalmist wants God to turn his attention elsewhere and leave him living for a while yet. This psalm typically gives no indication of a belief in an after-life. See the article ‘Resurrection’ in the Introduction.

As noted earlier there are parallels here with the thinking of Job. Compare the following:

My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle, and come to their end without hope.
 Remember that my life is a breath; my eye will never again see good.
 The eye that beholds me will see me no more; while your eyes are upon me, I shall be gone.
 As the cloud fades and vanishes, so those who go down to Sheol do not come up;
 they return no more to their houses, nor do their places know them any more.
 Therefore I will not restrain my mouth; I will speak in the anguish of my spirit;
 I will complain in the bitterness of my soul.
 Am I the Sea, or the Dragon, that you set a guard over me?
 When I say, 'My bed will comfort me, my couch will ease my complaint,'
 then you scare me with dreams and terrify me with visions,
 so that I would choose strangling and death rather than this body.
 I loathe my life; I would not live forever. Let me alone, for my days are a breath.
 What are human beings, that you make so much of them, that you set your mind on them,
 visit them every morning, test them every moment?
 Will you not look away from me for a while, let me alone until I swallow my spittle?
 If I sin, what do I do to you, you watcher of humanity?
 Why have you made me your target?
 Why have I become a burden to you?
 Why do you not pardon my transgression and take away my iniquity?
 For now I shall lie in the earth; you will seek me, but I shall not be.

– Job 7:6-21

Are not the days of my life few? Let me alone, that I may find a little comfort,
 before I go, never to return, to the land of gloom and deep darkness.

– Job 10:20-21

A mortal, born of woman, few of days and full of trouble,
 comes up like a flower and withers, flees like a shadow and does not last.
 Do you fix your eyes on such a one? Do you bring me into judgment with you?
 Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? No one can.
 Since their days are determined, and the number of their months is known to you,
 and you have appointed the bounds that they cannot pass,
 look away from them, and desist, that they may enjoy, like labourers, their days.

– Job 14:1-6

Praying this psalm as a Christian we remember that Jesus, like Abel, died prematurely (Hebrews 12:24). Like the psalmist, Jesus did not open his mouth (Mark 14:61), and Jesus, too, cried out that the cup might pass away (Mark 14:36). Jesus placed his hope in God, knowing-in-faith that he was passing from this world to the Father (John 17:13).