

Psalm 39

1 I said, I will take heed to my ways, that I sin not with my tongue: I will keep my mouth with a bridle, while the wicked is before me.

This is a Psalm of David, the powerful king, to the chief Musician. Two main themes appear: (1) the frailty and fragility of man; and (2) internal turmoil/struggle (IT), expressing hope and despair simultaneously. Both are very real for us. More is present, but those are the two biggies to watch for.

This bridle referenced to keep control of the tongue means to “stop” – hold up horsie -- and the verb form is found at Deuteronomy 25:4: **Thou shalt not muzzle the ox when he treadeth out the corn.** Citing the bridle emphasizes the great difficulty we have in ruling our tongue. **If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridlenth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain.** (James 1:26).

The dangerous, challenging and narrow paths we travel provoke ill-advised words from our mouths – you know it's so. We must work at governing our tongue and not allow it to break forth into sinful reflections on God and his providence. This is particularly so when the wicked are on the scene, such as described here: **For I know your (house of Israel) manifold transgressions and your mighty sins: they afflict the just, they take a bribe, and they turn aside the poor in the gate from their right. Therefore the prudent shall keep silence in that time; for it is an evil time.** (Amos 5:12, 13).

²I was dumb with silence, I held my peace, even from good; and my sorrow was stirred.

The opening phrase is more properly understood to mean David was dumb in silence, two words expressing the same thing with greater force. He was absolutely mute, saying nothing at all. *I was so long and so obstinately silent, that I seemed to myself and to others to be dumb. Two words put together expressing the same thing, to aggravate or increase it. Or, I was dumb with quietness, i.e. not out of sullenness, but with submissiveness to God's dispensations, which is oft noted by silence.* (Poole).

Sometimes it is good to restrain the words that come out of our mouth, especially in God's presence. Consider these profitable words: **Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools: for they consider not that they do evil. Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few.** (Ecclesiastes 5:1, 2).

³My heart was hot within me, while I was musing the fire burned: then spake I with my tongue,

This is a picture of an excited mind, intense feelings, strong emotions. Some say David was thinking of the goodness of God and things to come. I won't rule that out. But I think it more likely he was contemplating the wicked and was unable to suppress his feelings any longer, giving vent to words coming out of his mouth. Elihu colorfully describes this condition: **Behold, my belly is as wine which hath no vent; it is ready to burst like new bottles. I will speak, that I may be refreshed: I will open my lips and answer.** (Job 32:19, 20). IT: [O]ur flesh had no rest . . . within were fears. (2 Cor. 7:5).

I couldn't resist sharing Spurgeon's thoughts on this verse found in the Treasury of David: *"My heart was hot within me." The friction of inward thoughts produced an intense mental heat. The door of his heart was shut, and with the fire of sorrow burning within, the chamber of his soul soon grew unbearable with heat. Silence is an awful thing for a sufferer, it is the surest method to produce madness. Mourner, tell your sorrow; do it first and most fully to God, but even to pour it out before some wise and godly friend is far from being wasted breath. "While I was musing the fire burned." As he thought upon the case of the wicked and his own daily affliction, he could not unravel the mystery of providence, and therefore he became greatly agitated. While his heart was musing it was fusing, for the subject was confusing. It became harder every moment to be quiet; his volcanic soul was tossed with an inward ocean of fire, and heaved to and fro with a mental earthquake; an eruption was imminent, the burning lava must pour forth in a fiery stream. "Then spake I with my tongue." The original is grandly laconic. "I spake." The muzzled tongue burst all its bonds. The gag was hurled away. Misery, like murder, will out. You can silence praise, but anguish is clamorous. Resolve or no resolve, heed or no heed, sin or no sin, the impetuous torrent forced for itself a channel and swept away every restraint.*

⁴ LORD, make me to know mine end, and the measure of my days, what it is: that I may know how frail I am.

⁵ Behold, thou hast made my days as an handbreadth; and mine age is as nothing before thee: verily every man at his best state is altogether vanity. Selah.

⁶ Surely every man walketh in a vain shew: surely they are disquitted in vain: he heapeth up riches, and knoweth not who shall gather them.

Verses 4-6 will be examined together as they generally cover the same subject matter, that is, the frailty, weakness, futility and vanity of human beings. The words from these verses are powerful and mostly require little by way of explanation.

Jim Thorpe is almost universally considered to be the greatest athlete of all time, or at least during the last two centuries. He won (going away) gold medals in the pentathlon and decathlon at the 1912 Olympics held in Sweden. He was an All American football player in college, a Hall of Fame professional football star while also playing for the New York Giants baseball team (then frequent world champions). He possessed incomparable human strength and stamina, along with amazing athletic talent. But he quickly aged and faded and is no longer with us. Similarly, Willie Mays, one of the best baseball players to ever live and one who I admired, recently died, and it seems like only yesterday I watched his brilliance.

We wisely consider our end and that early and often. Similarly, we are smart to realize that our days are relatively few and precisely numbered. Life on this earth is short. If you're sitting here today as a child or young adult, you may not think so. But believe me, life is short! We are transient, momentary beings that will soon cease this world.

The handbreadth mentioned in verse 5 is probably your four fingers pressed together. That is a small measurement and one that is before our eyes daily. We need look no further for a measuring line by which to take the dimension of our days. And in any event, our days are as nothing before God, of whom Peter said: **[O]ne day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.** (2 Peter 3:8). And this: **For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night.** (Psalm 90:4).

The vain walk presented in verse 6 is interestingly described by commentator Barnes this way: *The word rendered "vain show" - **דלצ** tselem - means properly a shade, a shadow; and then, an image or likeness, as shadowing forth any real object. * * * Here the idea seems to be that of an image, as contradistinguished from a reality; the shadow of a thing, as distinguished from the substance. Man seems to be like an image, a shadow, a phantom - and not a real object, walking about. He is a form, an appearance, that soon vanishes away like a shadow.*

On top of that, man is disquieted in vain. They are filled with anxiety, while making plans which they execute only with much toil, care and trouble. They are busy, hustling and bustling shadows, existing for no real purposes and accomplishing nothing.

All for what? **Yea, I hated all my labor which I had taken under the sun: because I should leave it unto the man that shall be after me. And who knoweth whether he shall be a wise man or a fool? Yet shall he have rule over all my labor wherein I have labored, and wherein I have shewed myself wise under the sun. This is also vanity.** (Ecclesiastes 2:18, 19).

We can't leave this topic without remembering Isaiah 40:6-8: **All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field: the grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the Lord bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand forever.**

And now, Lord, what wait I for? my hope is in thee.

Having established it down deep inside the vanity of man, it's now time to determine where to look for hope. What is our expectation? Flesh has nothing to offer when it comes to salvation and eternity. We must look to God, and understand clearly that no flesh can **glory in his presence.** (1 Cor. 1:29). But we are assured that the **glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together[.]** (Isaiah 40:5).

Turning to God brings consolation, comfort and cheerfulness. The dark picture that results from considering humanity begins to brighten. *[The psalmist now returns to himself, and comes to his right mind, and to a right way of judging and acting; making the Lord the object of his hope and trust,*

expecting all good things, grace and glory, alone from him; and this is the hope which makes not ashamed. (Gill).

⁸Deliver me from all my transgressions: make me not the reproach of the foolish.

Transgressions are the cause of all distresses, inward and outward. That being the undeniable case, we wisely should continually pray for deliverance from those transgressions, as the Psalmist does here.

When we do that, this verse seems to say that one guaranteed result is that we will not become the reproach of foolish and wicked man.

⁹I was dumb, I opened not my mouth; because thou didst it.

We have here an obvious reprise of the opening theme of this Psalm. It's again time to keep our mouths shut. No murmuring or repining against God and his providence. *The meaning here is, that he did not open his mouth to complain; he did not speak of God as if he had dealt unkindly or unjustly with him. (Barnes).*

¹⁰Remove thy stroke away from me: I am consumed by the blow of thine hand.

¹¹When thou with rebukes dost correct man for iniquity, thou makest his beauty to consume away like a moth: surely every man is vanity. Selah.

We again need to combine verses for consideration, this time verses 10 and 11, as you will see they have a common theme.

Though David would not open his mouth to complain, he would (and does) open his mouth to pray this desperate and plaintive prayer. Please, God, remove your powerful and effective stroke or I will be destroyed by it. The urgency of David's words drip from the page.

Let's take a closer look at this consumption directly resulting from God's chastising and correcting hand. Your comeliness, wealth, health, strength and prosperity disintegrate like a moth when crushed by human touch. **And he, as a rotten thing, consumeth, as a garment that is moth eaten. (Job 13:28). For the moth shall eat them up like a garment, and the worm shall**

eat them like wool[.] (Isaiah 51:8). Therefore will I be unto Ephraim as a moth, and to the house of Judah as rottenness. (Hosca 5:12).

Note: While the context of our verses deals with the sobering and reality-seizing impact of God's chastisements on his people, the moth metaphor is also often used in describing God's overall intention to destroy his enemies, nationally and individually; remember, the moth is actively eating the very fabric of America all day, every day. In this regard, I give you these wonderful words found at Job 4:17-21: **Shall mortal man be more just than God? Shall a man be more pure than his maker? Behold, he put no trust in his servants; and his angels he charged with folly: how much less in them that dwell in houses of clay, whose foundation is in the dust, which are crushed before the moth? They are destroyed from morning to evening: they perish for ever without any regarding it. Doth not their excellency which is in them go away? They die, even without wisdom.**

Here's a sampling of what you rightly feel by the blow of God's hand: I am become vile (Lamentations 1:11); I stood trembling (Daniel 10:11); **Woe is me! For I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips** (Isaiah 6:5); and, my groaning is not hid from thee. My heart panteth, my strength faileth me: as for the light of mine eyes, it also is gone from me (Psalm 38:9, 10).

¹²Hear my prayer, O LORD, and give ear unto my cry; hold not thy peace at my tears: for I am a stranger with thee, and a sojourner, as all my fathers were.

Looking at this through the lens of the overall theme of this Psalm, that is, the vanity and brevity of life, it's as though David was pathetically asking why, given that the tenure of life is so uncertain, God looks so angrily on him? In doing so, he applies Abraham's words metaphorically: **And Abraham stood up from before his dead, and spake unto the sons of Heth, saying, I am a stranger and a sojourner with you: give me a possession of a burying place with you, that I may bury my dead out of my sight.** (Genesis 23:3, 4).

In another place, David combined the two sentiments quite nicely: **For we are strangers before thee, and sojourners, as were all our fathers: our days on the earth are as a shadow, and there is none abiding.** (1 Chronicles 29:15).

Benson's thoughts on this verse are very probative and helpful: *For I am a stranger, &c. — Though I be not only a native, but actually king of this land, yet, in truth, I am but a stranger and sojourner, both in regard of my very*

*uncertain and short continuance here, where I am only on my journey to my real and long home; and in respect of the many wants, hardships, contempts, and injuries to which I am exposed, as men usually are in strange lands. And, therefore, I greatly need and desire thy pity and help. With thee — Either, 1st, In thy sight or judgment, and therefore in reality. We are apt to flatter ourselves that we are settled inhabitants, and can hardly believe we are but strangers on earth, but thou knowest the truth of the matter, that we really are such. Or, 2d, In thy land, or territory, who art the only proprietor of it, in which I only sojourn by thy leave and favour, and during thy pleasure, * * * * * **As all my fathers were** — Both in thy judgment and in their own, [] upon which account thou didst take special care of them, and, therefore, take care also of me.*

¹⁵ O spare me, that I may recover strength, before I go hence, and be no more.

Spare me, give me a break, this life at best is short and full of evil and trouble, so please do not add affliction to the afflicted. The thought of the original word here is “to look away from”, that is, look away from me and do not come to inflict death – preserve me.

That I may recover strength, both of the outward and inward man, both of which are weak and oppressed. The original word here means to be bright, to shine forth. The idea is that of being cheered up, strengthened and invigorated.

Before I go, that is, to the grave. **Before I go whence I shall not return, even to the land of darkness and the shadow of death[.]** (Job 10:21). **The eye of him that hath seen me shall see me no more: thine eyes are upon me, and I am not.** (Job 7:8). **[F]or now shall I sleep in the dust; and thou shalt seek me in the morning, but I shall not be.** (Job 7:21). And so on. A whole lot of Job here, but we know how it all turned out. **Behold, we count them happy which endure. Ye have heard of the patience of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord; that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy.** (James 5:11).

