

## Prayer

O my Lord and my God, my every thought is directed towards You. I turn to You in joy and in sorrow, in peace and in strife, in success and in failure, and in pain and in liberty. Save me, Jesus, from every thought, word and deed which might separate me from You and from the Father, my God and my Maker. AMEN

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Weekly Theme: The food we eat

Pray for the agricultural industries which supply the food we eat, whether large or small. All of them make an important contribution to the welfare of people. The people involved range from farmers and fishermen to transport companies, as well as marketing and retail industries. Pray for honesty and open dealing within the food industries so that people can know what they eat.

## Meditation

Sometimes, when we are troubled by the life You have given us, O Lord It feels as if the strength has been sapped from our spiritual reserves. The promises You give us seem to hold only for so long; then we question them, Trying to find the answers to our passing yet persistent problems, Not realising that in faithfulness, You will not let us go.

Hold us firmly, do not let us slip  
Show us the way when we cannot see,  
Deal with us carefully and protect our fragility,  
Calm our nerves when we are touched by fear;  
Speak swiftly when we need Your advice.

For this is where discipleship counts; when in distress, we trust our all to You.

## Bible Study - Psalm 39

*For the director of music.*

*For Jeduthun. A psalm of David.*

<sup>1</sup> I said, 'I will watch my ways  
and take care not to sin with my  
tongue;

I will put a muzzle on my mouth  
as long as the wicked are in my  
presence.'

<sup>2</sup> I remained silent and speechless,  
not saying anything good:

But my distress grew worse,  
and my heart burned within me.

<sup>3</sup> While I thought, the fire burned,  
then I broke out into speech.

<sup>4</sup> 'O LORD, show me when my life will end  
and the number of my days;  
let me know how brief my life is.

<sup>5</sup> You have made my days like the breadth  
of a hand;

my lifetime is short before you.  
The life of each person is but a mere puff  
of wind. (Selah)

<sup>6</sup> They walk about like a phantom,  
They gather wealth but only in vain;

not knowing who will profit from it.

<sup>7</sup> 'But now, O Lord, what am I to look for?  
My hope is in you.

<sup>8</sup> Save me from all my transgressions;  
do not make me the scorn of fools.

<sup>9</sup> I was silent, and would not open my  
mouth,  
for You have done this.

<sup>10</sup> Remove Your scourge from me;  
I am overcome by the blows of Your  
hand.

<sup>11</sup> You rebuke and discipline people for their  
sin;

You consume what they value like a  
moth;  
All people are but a breath. (Selah)

<sup>12</sup> 'Hear my prayer, O LORD,  
and listen to my cry;  
Do not be deaf to my weeping.

For with You, I live as a foreigner,  
a nomad, as all my fathers were.

<sup>13</sup> Look away from me, that I may feel  
happy again  
before I go and am no more.'

## Review

This Psalm is an astonishing piece of Hebrew poetry. You will probably wonder what it all means after a first reading, for it seems very negative about life (39:4,5) and about God's response to sin (39:10,11,13). No scholar has been able to find a historical setting for this psalm or locate its place in Israelite worship, and there is also great division amongst writers about what it all means; yet all agree the quality and power of its poetry and verse.

Some see this psalm as a desperate plea of a dying sick man who has become infuriated by the success and wealthy lives of those around him, who have not lived Godly lives as he has. When he dies, the writer has nowhere to go except Sheol, the place of the departed, and pleads for mercy before he goes (39:13). This reading of the psalm leaves the Christian with a sense of distance from the text because Jesus Christ has shown us a different path through death to life, and many regard this psalm as one with little spiritual value. Most of the commentaries I have read simply do not attempt to offer any substantial explanation of the text, remarking on various matters of intrigue, such as the connections between verses 4 to 6 and the book of Ecclesiastes, which is also concerned with the vanity of human existence and the transient nature of God's blessings (we will examine this later, in detail). Again, it is not very easy for a Christian to feel that they have found any spiritual value in this.

However, although we must not expect every passage of the Old Testament to be immediately obvious to us, Christians believe that all of God's Word sustains us in our quest for truth, and this psalm must therefore have some value. In that light, I suggest that we stand back from any preconceptions about Psalm 39 and look at each verse, and then the best way to explore it is to ask the question, 'why should the writer say that?' In this way, a picture begins to emerge of a spiritual journey undertaken by the writer. This should not surprise us, because nearly all the psalms describe some kind of spiritual journey. The details of the journey and why I feel able to say what comes next are all contained within the main Bible study, but the short version of it is a spiritual journey from anger and frustration at life's troubles to a place of acceptance of personal sin and the authority of Almighty God over all things.

At the beginning of the psalm, the psalmist is clearly upset and finds it hard to hold in his feelings (39:1-3) but after reflecting upon the nature of God and the vanity of life and material wealth (39:4-6), he makes a confession of sin to God (39:8) and reflects on the authority of God and his right to deal with all sin with justice (39:9,10,11). At the end of the psalm, the psalmist is in a place of abject penitence, fearing the wrath of God and his gaze because of his own sinfulness (39:13). The psalm does not offer us any further comment on sin or indication of God's response, or of forgiveness; and this leaves us feeling that the psalm is somewhat cold. However, as it was written long before the time of Christ, through whom we have the true forgiveness of our sins, perhaps it is a proper and real reflection of Old Testament faith, and we should accept it at that. Other Old Testament texts point us towards Christ's forgiving work, but the value of this psalm lies in the way it points us to the spiritual journey whereby we come to know that we need salvation, and it does not pretend to describe salvation itself. We should value it for that.

## Going Deeper

There are four sections to the psalm, verses 1-3, 4-6, 7-11 and 12-13. By following what happens in each section, we can follow the spiritual journey of the psalmist. Given the considerable confusion amongst scholars about the psalm, it is surprisingly straightforward!

### **A dispute?**

The starting place for the Psalm is some kind of upset which has made the psalmist very cautious to speak. The first section of the psalm consists of three verses, 1,2, and 3 which describe an attempt to keep quiet in the face of this upset, but we do not know the details of what has happened; all we have is a spiritual commentary on it. The psalmist clearly feels that wicked people have made his life very hard and he is on the receiving end of some wrongful accusations and scornful abuse (see 39:2 and the psalmist's reference to 'fools' in verse 8). What has happened has clearly made him very cross indeed and it is possible that prior to this psalm, he has spoken hastily and in anger. Certainly, he has reached a point where he feels that it would be foolish to continue speaking; 'I will watch my ways ... I will put a muzzle on my tongue' (39:1).

Verses 2 and 3 describe a process which most of us experience. It happens when we become more and more distressed by something. Even if we have tried to keep the lid on our feelings, they boil up inside us until we can hold it in no longer and burst out by saying something out of

frustration or of anger; 'my distress grew worse ... the fire burned ... I broke out into speech.' We all know that in such circumstances, we can often say things that should not be said, and make situations worse.

This much is obvious, but some translations of the Bible place punctuation in the text which makes it look as if the words that were said out of the psalmist's anger and frustration were those that came next in verse 4. Given that there is no punctuation as we understand it in the ancient Hebrew language, this is merely presumption, and because of the pattern and style of the Hebrew poetry, I have placed a full stop at the end of verse 3, and begun a new stanza in verse 4. This is vital for our translation and what it means, for I believe that the words that the psalmist spoke next were not said in anger. Verses 2 and 3 are simply a description of what the psalmist felt in the midst of his difficult situation. They are in the past tense, and are written not to explain the words that come next in the psalm, but to illustrate verse 1 and explain what was going on before the psalmist wisely decided to hold his tongue and keep quiet.

### ***A reflection on the Creative authority of God***

Verses 4 to 6 are a reflection on the futility of life; they are the anguished thoughts of someone who was distressed and has subsequently decided to address God with his troubled thoughts. The first thing to observe is the very significant fact that at this point, the psalmist turns his attention away from the distress that had previously burned up his soul (39:2) and talks to God. If you have been in the situation of being very upset by something that has happened to you, the you will know how hard it is to turn your thoughts away to anything, let alone to God.

However, this is what the psalmist does. What he says is an ancient way of saying: 'O Lord, life is pointless, our wealth means nothing; and besides this, You know everything that is going to happen to us.' The words of the psalm say that God has made everything and in comparison our life is small and insignificant, perhaps meaningless (39:4,5). In addition, when we look at the vastness of time and space, gathered wealth is relatively meaningless and a matter of personal vanity (39:5,6). These two themes are typical of the Biblical book of Ecclesiastes, for example; 'However many years a man may live, let him enjoy them all. But let him remember the days of darkness, for they will be many. Everything to come is vanity.' (Ecclesiastes 11:8 and also 3:9-15). The teaching here is about God's mastery of time which is so vast that we must be careful not to imagine ourselves to be more important than we are! It is a sobering thought, and perhaps one that is very appropriate when facing difficult personal situations.

This connection with Ecclesiastes is interesting, for within this Biblical book, there is also some significant teaching about guarding one's steps and the prudence of keeping silence; 'never be rash with your mouth and let not your heart be quick to utter a word ... therefore let your words be few.' (Ecclesiastes 5:2). It is certainly worth considering that the psalmist was familiar with Ecclesiastes and reflected upon its teaching in the midst of his distress. The words of verses 4 to 6 are not an angry rant against God, but a reflection on God's authority and power using Biblical material. It should not be quickly dismissed.

### ***Save me from my sin***

Now that the psalmist has turned away from the grief and distress of the situation which wound him up earlier in the psalm, he is able to address God directly and do two things; firstly express hope in the Lord (39:7), and ask for the forgiveness of his sins 'save me from my transgressions' (39:8). He remains troubled to the end of the psalm (see 39:12) but by reflecting on the majesty and authority of God and getting things into some kind of perspective using Scripture, he is then able to rediscover his true hope in the living God, and do what is right by accepting that he is a sinner himself, and he needs forgiveness. Note that he is no longer angry with any opponent or troubled by rising anger within his soul; indeed, he dismisses his enemies as 'fools' (39:8) which is casual language indeed, given the heat of his earlier feelings!

The request for forgiveness comes from the psalmist together with his acceptance that God is just, and that he has suffered because of his own sin and foolishness; 'remove Your scourge from me; I am overcome by the blows of Your hand.' (39:10). He also pleads with the Lord for justice on the basis that he has attempted to do what is right by ceasing to speak (39:9), and acknowledges that God is just to discipline people for sin (39:11). Certainly, the tone of the psalm is very downbeat; he says 'all people are but a breath' (39:11), but at this point on the psalmist's spiritual journey, we have come a long way from the hot emotions of the first few verses!

## **A final prayer**

In the light of all this, the psalmist arrives at a place where he can call on the Lord to hear his prayer (39:12). Then, the main problem of this psalm stares us straight in the face. The last verse says; 'look away from me, that I may rejoice again before I go and am no more' (39:13). It seems as if the psalmist asks the Lord to turn away from him, for he fears death under the gaze of the Almighty! Certainly, death is the clear implication of the last phrase of the whole psalm.

Our natural feeling is that surely God does not want to destroy a good and faithful servant who has come to him at a time of trouble and done his best to turn away from wickedness of speech! However, the point is precisely this, that by so saying, the psalmist proves his own righteousness, for only someone who really did accept the authority and lordship of Almighty God would be prepared to accept the personal consequences of his sinful actions.

We do not know what God's response to this psalm is, for it is not stated. I suspect that if this psalm was used as a prayer in ancient times, then after it was said, a priest might well have pronounced some kind of absolution of forgiveness of sin after it was used. The people who first used this psalm had no direct knowledge of Jesus, but through the faith of their forefathers and the use of their Scriptures, they nevertheless approached God in hope (39:7)

## **Application**

The journey we travel in order to realise that we need the saving work of God and the forgiveness of our sins is very important. It does appear that this psalm shows us one such journey, which starts with a situation of grief and torment. These situations will often force us to take stock and re-evaluate our lives and the important thing for us to see within this psalm is that this re-evaluation comes by reflecting upon God's Word. It happens to be the book of Ecclesiastes in this case, an Old Testament book which we may find very difficult, but the principle is still valid. If we take stock by using God's Word, the Scriptures, then we will be led by the Spirit to consider our own sin, as the psalmist did, and where the psalmist did not have a Saviour to point him to his salvation, we do.

The Gospel is often preached on the assumption that people want it. Sadly, in much of society, the last thing people want is for others to tell them what they think they ought to know. It is just not the right thing to do. If we understand the spiritual principle of this psalm aright, then times of crisis are occasions when people may be open to the Gospel, and if through our friendship we can assist others to consider the truth about God when they are going through rough times, then people may be assisted towards the place where they can hear about the forgiving love of God through Jesus Christ.

## **Questions** *(for use in groups)*

1. Does this reading of Psalm 39 make sense to you? Did you see anything else in the Psalm which you thought was interesting?
2. Is the journey of faith described in this Psalm easy or hard to walk?
3. Look again at the way this psalm talks about wealth and possessions. Do they have any value before God, and should they have any value for us?

## **Discipleship**

Even though we read this psalm as Christians, the spiritual journey it describes may still be important for us, even though the ending will be different. All of us face very difficult circumstances in life, from time to time. It is a characteristic of them that they are very hard to deal with, and it is often true that we speak too much and say things we should not. This psalm has words of wisdom for us, therefore, and we should use the journey as a model, knowing that if we follow its wisdom, we will be blessed.

## **Final Prayer**

Your Love, O Lord Jesus, saves us from more than we can imagine. It can save us from bitterness, from fear, from hopelessness, from aggression, and from all the work of the enemy which draws us back into sin. Praise You Lord Jesus for Your love, shown in death, which conquers all sin. AMEN