HOW TRANSIENT I AM!

A Psalm for the New Year: Psalm 39

By

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Special New Year's Message

How Transient I Am!
(A Psalm for the New Year: Psalm 39)

Two things always make me think about the shortness of life: illness and the New Year. When I get sick, as I was the week before Christmas, I realize how weak and vulnerable I am. An invisible germ can invade my body and sap my strength and there isn't much that I can do about it. When you’re well and especially when you’re young, you tend to think that you’re strong and invincible. I recently read an interview with Tom Cruise in Reader's Digest. He comes across as being in total control of his life. He’s not! He should look at actors like Christopher Reeve, who broke his neck, or Michael J. Fox, stricken with Parkinson’s disease, and realize that life is very tenuous. Illness reminds me of that fact.

Changing the calendar to a New Year also has a way of reminding me of how short life is. I preached on this psalm on the first Sunday of 1981. I was lamenting then, 25 years ago, how quickly the years fly by! Now my kids are all married and I’m looking at my last year in my fifties. The clock of life never stops to give you a time out. It just keeps ticking toward the final buzzer.

Since life is so short and goes by so quickly, how can we make the most of it? None of us would say, “I’d like to waste my life!” However many years God gives us, we want to make them count for eternity. But, how?

Psalm 39 reflects David’s struggle with this problem. We encounter the mixed emotions of a man who is reeling under God’s discipline as experienced in some illness (39:10), and yet who knows that God is his only hope (39:7). He has no one else to turn to. David’s answer is simple and yet profound:

Because life is so transient, we must live it for the Lord.

James (4:14) states that life is a vapor. Scripture often mentions that we are like the grass of the field, flourishing in the morning, but faded and gone by sundown (Job 14:2; Ps. 90:5-6; Ps. 102:11; Isa. 40:6-8; 1 Pet. 1:24). Because life is so short, to be lived meaningfully and productively, it must be lived for the Lord in light
of eternity. My parents used to have a plaque by our door with the familiar couplet, “Only one life, ’twill soon be past, only what’s done for Christ will last.” That’s what David is saying in this psalm.

BACKGROUND:

This psalm arises out of some unspecified problem in David’s life (39:10). Apparently he had some illness, which he relates to God’s hand of discipline (39:11). It may be that David saw a direct link between a sin that he had committed and this trial, or he may be simply relating his suffering to the curse on the human race that stems from Adam’s sin.

But whichever the case, in the midst of his suffering, David is tormented with the severity of God’s discipline in view of the shortness and uncertainty of life. Derek Kidner says (Psalms [IVP], 1:155), “The burning question of this psalm is why God should so assiduously discipline a creature as frail and fleeting as man.” It’s the same question that the suffering Job asks (Job 7:16-19):

“I waste away; I will not live forever. Leave me alone, for my days are but a breath. What is man that You magnify him, and that You are concerned about him, that You examine him every morning and try him every moment? Will You never turn Your gaze away from me, nor let me alone until I swallow my spittle?”

In his intense pain, Job is asking, “God, don’t You have better things to do than to afflict me? Just leave me alone!” But although both Job and David complain, they are not defiant. David knows that unbelievers are waiting to scoff at him and at his God, and so he is careful to voice his protest in a submissive manner, as a learner (39:4) whose only hope (39:7) is the God who seemingly is being so harsh with him. It’s in this context that David makes his point, that life is transient and thus must be lived for the Lord.

1. Life is transient (39:4-6).

David is painfully aware of the shortness of life, as brought home to him by his suffering. He prays that he might learn the lesson of his suffering well. It’s so easy to forget the lesson as soon as the suffering is past and to revert to the mindset that life will go on for a very long time to come. David prays that God would not let him forget how transient he is.
Twice (39:5, 11) David repeats, “Surely every man at his best is a mere breath.” The word breath comes from a Hebrew word that is used 36 times in Ecclesiastes to mean vanity. It refers to that which has no substance, or to that which is transitory and frail. One early writer illustrates the Greek equivalent word with building houses of sand on the seashore, chasing the wind, shooting at the stars, or pursuing your shadow (Richard Trench, Synonyms of the New Testament [Eerdmans], p. 181). A modern example might be that of a child chasing soap bubbles. There is no substance to that activity. If you try to catch one, it bursts in your hand.

David is saying that life seems like that. It is like your breath on a frosty day. You see it for a quick instant and then it is gone. He gives two factors that make life seem so transient:

A. Life is transient in view of eternity (39:5).

David compares his short life to God in eternity: “Behold, You have made my days as handbreadths, and my lifetime as nothing in Your sight.” When you’re young, 70, 80, or 90 years may seem like a long time. But when you view the few fleeting years of life in light of God and eternity, they are nothing.

David had a similar thought in mind when he wrote Psalm 8:3-4: “When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have ordained; what is man that You take thought of him, and the son of man that You care for him?”

Looking up at the night sky should give you the sense of being a speck in time comparison with the eternal God, who spoke the universe into existence. If you look carefully on a clear night, you can spot Andromeda Galaxy, the most distant object visible to the naked eye. If you could travel at the speed of light, it would take you 2.2 million years to get there! It contains hundreds of billions of stars. I used to have a poster that showed the Milky Way galaxy. An arrow pointed to a tiny spot and said, “You are here!”

Think about that and then pray with David (39:4), “Lord, make me to know my end and what is the extent of my days; let me know how transient I am.” Life is transient in view of eternity!

B. Life is transient in view of death (39:6).
Whatever man does, it all comes to nothing at death. Men work hard and scheme and fight to amass huge fortunes. They die and their bodies go into a box in the ground. What was the point of all their frenetic activity?

Since you cannot escape death, you should not live as if you could. A legend tells about a Baghdad merchant who asked his servant to run an errand. While at the marketplace, the servant rounded a corner and came face to face with Lady Death. He was so frightened that he ran back to tell his master. “I’m terrified,” he said. “I want to take the fastest horse and ride toward Samarra.” The master granted the request.

Later that day, the merchant himself went to the marketplace and he, too, saw Lady Death. “Why did you startle my servant?” he confronted her. Lady Death replied, “Frankly, it was I who was startled. I couldn’t understand why your servant was in Baghdad, because I have an appointment with him tonight in Samarra.” None of us can escape that appointment!

Maybe you’re thinking, “I know that death is certain, but I’m young and I’d rather not think about it. I still have plenty of time.”

But, death is not only certain, it is also unexpected. You don’t know whether you will be alive at this time tomorrow, let alone on next New Year’s Day. I read about a Scottish pastor who was burdened for the soul of a businessman who occasionally attended his church. The man readily admitted that he was not born again. Whenever the pastor would try to talk to him about his soul, the man would reply that as long as he was in good health, he would wait. Besides, he was just too busy to think about such matters.

So one day, the pastor decided to startle the man into realizing that he couldn’t afford to keep dodging the matter of where he would spend eternity. So he walked into the man’s office without knocking or calling in advance. When the startled man looked up, the pastor asked abruptly, “Did you expect me?” “No, I didn’t,” the man replied. The pastor then said grimly, “What if I had been Death?” Then he spun around and walked out.

The haunting question kept echoing in the ears of the businessman. It demanded an answer. By the end of the day he had trusted in Jesus Christ as his Savior and Lord. (“Our Daily Bread.”)
So we need to keep in front of us at all times the fact that life is transient in view of eternity and in view of death. But, maybe you’re wondering, “So what? What can I do about it?” Well, you have two choices. You can live for yourself, figuring, “Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.” Or, you can live for the Lord, which is the only option with any hope. That’s what David did. He knew that because life is transient, ...

2. Life must be lived for the Lord (39:1-3, 7-13).

You may be thinking, “That’s a nice cliché, but what does it mean?” David delineates three things:

A. To live for the Lord means that I put all my hope in the Lord (39:7).

David writes, “And now, Lord, for what do I wait? My hope is in You.” The longer I live, the more I realize that there is nowhere else to put your hope. Is your hope in your family or friends? Loving relationships are a wonderful gift from God, but people can easily be taken away. If your hopes are there, you’ll be left empty and disappointed. Is your hope in this world, or in the things of the world? You will surely be disappointed, because those things cannot satisfy your soul and they’re as fleeting as your breath on a cold morning. But, if you make the Lord and His promises your hope, you will never be disappointed.

That’s easy to say and even easy to agree with. But in reality, even Christians can easily get caught up with the things of this world, rather than with the things of God. Many Christians, who would say that they hope in the Lord, subtly drift into the pursuit of financial security ahead of the pursuit of God. They work long hours to provide a comfortable lifestyle for their families. But they hardly give any thought or effort to get the gospel to those who have yet to hear about Jesus Christ. They’re too busy pursuing financial success and security.

Other sincere Christians have been tainted by the world concerning the pursuit of pleasure. There is a proper place, of course, for recreation. We all need time to be refreshed and renewed. But how much is enough? Many Christians won’t get involved in serving in the local church because, they say, “It would tie me down on the weekends.” Frankly, they are more committed to pursuing their
favorite activities than they are to seeking first God’s kingdom. So the church lacks faithful workers because we give lip service to the things of God, but our hearts are really in the pursuit of pleasure.

Even the family can wrongfully take precedence over the things of God. Certainly, God wants us committed to our families. But I’ve seen Christians who frequently take weekends away from church for “family time.” They are communicating to their kids that fun with the family takes priority over the kingdom of God. That’s the wrong message.

The solution to being enamored with the world is not to make a resolution to stop being enamored with the world. The solution is to become enamored with the Lord. When He becomes your delight and the object of your love, the things of the world fade away by way of comparison. The problem is not the pursuit of pleasure. Rather, it is the pursuit of pleasure in the wrong places, instead of pursuing pleasure in the only source that really delivers—in God.

B. To live for the Lord means that I make holiness my desire (39:1-3, 8).

David prays (39:8), “Deliver me from all my transgressions; make me not the reproach of the foolish.” The foolish are the godless, who are quick to pounce on any failure on the part of believers. David prays that they would not have occasion to scoff because of him. For that to be true, David knows that he needs to be delivered from his sins. He mentions two areas for holiness:

(1) Pursue holiness in speech (39:1-3).

David was aware that his words of complaint might be misunderstood or misinterpreted in the wrong company. He wanted to be careful not to say anything in the midst of his trials that would make God look bad. So, he muzzles his mouth (39:1).

To grow in holiness, you must learn to muzzle your mouth, if I may be so blunt. We see this in James 3:2, “For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well.” James (3:8) goes on to say that the tongue is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With that poison tongue, we can damage and even destroy lives, families, and entire churches. We should use our words to glorify God and to build up His people.
When I was in college, I met for a weekly dinner and disciple-ship group with a bunch of guys. While we waited for dinner to be served and often during dinner, we would exchange “friendly” put-downs. One guy would say something funny that put down another guy. That guy would respond by topping the first guy’s put-down. It was all supposedly in good fun.

Then one night one of the guys, a muscular, athletic new believer, got a stern look on his face and said, “Guys, we’re sinning!” We all began to protest and to put him down for being so overly righteous. But he stuck to his guns. Finally, we all realized that he was right and we were wrong. Our supposedly friendly put-downs violated Scripture. One such verse, which I recommend that you memorize, is Ephesians 4:29: “Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear.” Pursue holiness in your speech!

(2) Pursue holiness in behavior (39:8).

David wanted to be rid of all his transgressions. Since all sin begins in our minds, to be holy in our behavior, we have to judge our sins on the thought level. Jesus explained (Mark 7:21-23):

“For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man.”

Jesus gave the positive side in Matthew 5:6, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.” Hunger and thirst are strong motivators. When you hunger and thirst, you recognize your need. Sadly, even God’s people often do not sense their intense need for holiness, and so they dabble with it. But they don’t hunger and thirst after it.

Maybe, if you’re being honest with yourself, you’re thinking, “He’s describing me. I don’t really hunger and thirst after righteousness. If God wanted to lay it on me, I suppose it would be nice, but I’m not striving after it as if my survival depended on it.”

If that describes you, how do you develop a hunger and thirst for righteousness? One means that God often uses is the one that
He used here with David: trials. So, to live for the Lord means that I put all my hope in the Lord and that I strive after holiness. Also,

C. To live for the Lord means that I submit to His hand of discipline in my life (39:9-13).

God often uses trials to show us our lack of holiness. Trials should cause us to examine ourselves, to see what God may be trying to teach us. David here realized that God was disciplining him and he states a general principle (39:11): “With reproofs You chasten a man for iniquity; You consume as a moth what is precious to him... .” Why would God consume as a moth what is precious to us? That sounds cruel! The answer is, because we’re counting the wrong things as precious. Our hope isn’t fully in the Lord, but in other things. So God has to consume those things to show us that He alone is worth hoping in.

David’s final plea is full of mixed emotions. He pleads with God to remove the trial before he perishes (39:10) and yet he acknowledges God’s right to reprove him, thus showing his submission to God’s hand (39:11). His final appeal (39:12-13) contains a plea that God would hear his prayer, his cry, and his tears (note the increasing intensity). Then he asks God to turn away His gaze so that David could have a brief respite from his trials before he dies. Derek Kidner compares David’s request here with Peter’s illogical cry, “Depart from me” (Luke 5:8). He observes (p. 157) that such prayers in the Bible are a witness to God’s understanding of how we speak when we are desperate. He grants the request of our hearts, not necessarily the words of our lips.

When God disciplines you, it is fine to plead with Him to remove the trial. It is also okay to complain, as long as you do it with a submissive heart that acknowledges God’s right to deal with you as He sees fit. It is not okay to rage defiantly against God and accuse Him of treating you unfairly. The key to growing through His discipline is to submit to Him in it and to ask Him to help you learn the lessons He has for you in the trials (see Heb. 12:3-11).

**Conclusion**

I don’t mean to be morbid, but I think that it is helpful to think about the questions, “What if 2006 were my last year on earth? How would I live differently than I lived in 2005?” The only
way that your life will count for eternity is if your trust is in Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord and if you live each day for Him.

How can you know if you’re living for the Lord? Ask yourself three questions:

(1) What are your hopes? What are you counting on for happiness and fulfillment? Your marriage? Your children or grandchildren? Your retirement plans? Your financial stability? All of those things have their place, but they shouldn’t be the focus of your hopes. Only the Lord will satisfy. Put your hope in Him.

(2) What are your desires? What is it that you really seek in life? Happiness? Comfort? Peace? Love? These are all good things, but they do not come from seeking them, but rather from seeking the Lord. Hunger and thirst after His righteousness in your life.

(3) How do you respond to God’s hand of discipline in your life? When you encounter trials, what do you do? How do you deal with your attitude at such times? Do you complain and shake your fist at God? Do you turn your back on Him and turn to the world? Or, do you submit to His hand of discipline?

With David, pray in the New Year, “Lord, let me know how transient I am!” In light of that, live every day for the Lord!

Application Questions

1. Is it possible to think too much about how transient life is? If so, where is the balance point?

2. Can a Christian legitimately serve God just as well in a menial job as in “full time” service for Him? Why/why not?

3. Obviously, every parent has hopes for his marriage and family. Is this wrong? What does it mean to hope only in God?

4. If a Christian admits that he does not hunger and thirst after righteousness, how can he kindle that desire?