

Ponderings in the Psalms

The following is a Messianic Study on

Psalm 39

By Paul Cohen, Messianic Bible Teacher.
Brit Chadashah (Sydney)
www.BCSydney.com



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The *Pondering* studies were published in the Brit Chadashah Newsletter. Brit Chadashah (*New Covenant*) is a Messianic Fellowship in Sydney. Led by Paul Cohen a Jewish believer in Messiah Yeshua (Jesus). We meet together fortnightly for Bible studies from a Messianic Jewish Perspective. We are a unique fellowship made up of Jewish and Gentile people who are believers in Yeshua as the promised Messiah of Israel.

If you don't know Yeshua as your Messiah, we encourage you to search out the Scriptures for yourself. God promised in the book of Jeremiah, "*You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart*" (Jeremiah 29:13). And we hope you will make contact with us so that we can share more about the Messiah, His life and ministry.

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Brit Chadashah; P.O. Box 304; Caulfield South, VIC 3162, Australia
Email: bc@celebratemessiah.com.au
Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/BritChadashah.Sydney>
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Pondering Psalm 39

Introduction

Psalm 39: For the choir director, for Jeduthun. A Psalm of David.

David struggles to keep his mouth shut in the company of unbelievers due to his afflictions; as such, this is his prayer for walking in holiness with the LORD. Secondly, he reflects how transitory life is, especially with the disciplinary hand of God upon him, and so he asks for mercy.

Author

The author is David so this gives us an approximate date of about 1000 B.C.E.

Wisdom

In this Psalm David gives us great wisdom. From time to time, like David, we may feel the Lord is not answering us or healing us, and it may even seem that the LORD is pressing down on us. David makes an observation, that he will refrain from speaking about this while he is in the company of unbelievers. It is one thing to talk to mature believers about God's silence, or His non-responsiveness, or His arrows, but unbelievers cannot comprehend this (1 John 3:1). Some will take this to mean that God is dead or on holidays (1 Kings 18:27); and others might conclude 'if God is alive, He does not care.' Neither of these statements are true, for Yeshua laid down His life for you and me, and He will comfort us (2 Corinthians 1:3-4). Yet at the same time, we must remember that we are a small part of His overall plan, and we are not able to understand the whole. When we meet Him face to face, we will understand and perceive much more of His plan for every person, in time across the world. It is then that He will wipe away our tears (Isaiah 25:8; Revelation 7:17, 21:4).

Connected to Psalm 38

While Psalm 38 is a *Penitential Psalm*, Psalm 39 is a *Lament Psalm*. In both of these psalms we sense David's desperation. In Psalm 38 David dealt with his sin, which caused him to flee, and in Psalm 39 David is living amongst unbelievers (possibly 1 Samuel 27&29). From there David gives a desperate cry to the LORD. In Psalm 88 Heman the Ezrahite appeals to God for a hearing, because of the chastisements of God, which had brought him nearly to the grave. These are the cries of desperate saints (Psalm 88:16; Mark 5:23; Luke 8:47), and even Messiah Himself prayed like this (Psalm 22:1-2; Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34).

Outline

Jeduthun was one of the three Levitical worship leaders in the Tabernacle (1 Chronicles 16:41, 25:6; 2 Chronicles 5:12). Three Psalms of David are specifically given to him (Psalm 62:1 & 77:1).

David's silence (1-5)

¹ I said, "I will guard my ways That I may not sin with my tongue; I will guard my mouth as with a muzzle While the wicked are in my presence." ² I was mute and silent, I refrained *even* from good, And my sorrow grew worse. ³ My heart was hot within me, While I was musing the fire burned; *Then* I spoke with my tongue: ⁴ "Lord, make me to know my end And what is the extent of my days; Let me know how transient I am." ⁵ "Behold, You have made my days

as handbreadths, And my lifetime as nothing in Your sight; Surely every man at his best is a mere breath.

Selah.

James Montgomery Boice wrote that David “*knew how his words would be misunderstood and misused by such persons. To them his words would seem to be a criticism of God and His ways.*”¹ Because the situation did not resolve itself quickly, David seems to feel that the longer it goes on, the more his pain increases. A fire burned in his soul about these things and as he murmured, he could no longer contain himself and cried out, “make me to understand the brevity of my life.” He does not reveal to the unbelievers the feeling he had, but asks for the wisdom to know the shortness and the frailty of his life. Watching our way as believers, in the company of the unbelievers (the wicked), is prudent. How much more so when the chastisements of God are out against us because of our sins. The wisdom that David shares here is an application for us.

Thrice he repeats הֶבֶל (*hevel*) vapour or breath (also translated as vain, vanity or nothing) (verses 5, 6, 11). This frames his thought

1. man is a mere **breath**
2. a mere **breath** he murmurs
3. every man a mere **breath**

Mankind is nothing more than a puff of smoke, and understanding the shortness of life (Psalm 62:9) is important, so David emphasises that brevity.

Selah (הִלֵּחַ), as mentioned before in the Psalms and Habakkuk, means to pause and reflect; and just as David struggled, so we ought to struggle with issues from time to time.

Brevity of life (6-11)

⁶ “Surely every man walks about as a phantom; Surely they make an uproar for nothing; He amasses *riches* and does not know who will gather them.” ⁷ “And now, Lord, for what do I wait? My hope is in You.” ⁸ “Deliver me from all my transgressions; Make me not the reproach of the foolish.” ⁹ “I have become mute, I do not open my mouth, Because it is You who have done *it*.” ¹⁰ “Remove Your plague from me; Because of the opposition of Your hand I am perishing.” ¹¹ “With reproofs You chasten a man for iniquity; You consume as a moth what is precious to him; Surely every man is a mere breath.

Selah.

David continues in his lamentation, as we appear to live in a shadow, and all wealth we amass will be for another. *Lord, for what do I wait?....*, instead of looking to his pain, David turns towards God, His hope, and prays “remove your plague” (see note on Psalm 38). He is unable to speak because God is pressing down on him.

Verse 8: Rescue me from עֲשָׂוֹת (*peshah*) *transgressions* reflects rebellious or even criminal behaviour. In Psalm 38 we read about *folly*, *sin* and *iniquities*. David summarises it all in one word, *transgressions*, David’s crimes against the LORD. A word-play is made the word for fool here in Hebrew is נָבָל (*nabal*). Which as you will remember is also Abigail’s *good for nothing* husband (1 Samuel 25:3-42), I do not think David is addressing Nabal (Abigail’s

¹ James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms 1-41: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), page 340.

husband) specifically but his prayer is that he may not become the scorn of godless fools like Nabal.

While David is silent to the unbeliever, David speaks to God about his punishment. ‘*Your hand,*’ the power of Almighty God, is contrasted with the frailty of men, who are but a vapour.

Selah (סֶלָה) stop, pause and reflect on this.

Hear my prayer (12-13)

¹² “Hear my prayer, O Lord, and give ear to my cry; Do not be silent at my tears; For I am a stranger with You, A sojourner like all my fathers. ¹³ “Turn Your gaze away from me, that I may smile *again* Before I depart and am no more.”

In the final verses David pleads, no longer with words alone, but like Jeremiah, he lets his tears be a prayer (Jeremiah 9:1, cf. Psalm 40:3, 80:5, 102:9).

The Talmud references this in the Bavli Berachot, 32b

“On the subject of prayer, Rabbi Elazar also said: Since the day the Temple was destroyed the gates of prayer were locked and prayer is not accepted as it once was, as it is said in lamentation of the Temple’s destruction: “Though I plead and call out, He shuts out my prayer” (Lamentations 3:8). Yet, despite the fact that the gates of prayer were locked with the destruction of the Temple, the gates of tears were not locked, and one who cries before God may rest assured that his prayers will be answered, as it is stated: “Hear my prayer, Lord, and give ear to my pleading, keep not silence at my tears” (Psalms 39:12). Since this prayer is a request that God should pay heed to the tears of one who is praying, **he is certain that at least the gates of tears are not locked.**”

While I appreciate the rabbinic confidence, I do not see that reflected in David, who considers himself a stranger גֵר (*ger*) or a sojourner תּוֹשָׁב (*toshav*). A *ger* is a temporary resident with some rights (Exodus 12:19, 48-49), while the *toshav*, in contrast, is a complete outsider (Exodus 12:45). He may work for you, but is not part of you. David indicates he is an alien, an outsider with God, due to his folly.

David asks the Lord to look away from his sins (that is to forgive), so he may be cheerful, meaning recover in strength, before he dies. Similar phrases are found in Job (Job 7:19; 14:6 & 10:20-21). While he hopes for recovery, he leaves it in the hand of God.

“Before I depart and am no more.”

People suffer with great burdens, just like Job, David, Jeremiah, and sometimes even entire generations, like those of Jeremiah or the generation that followed Yeshua. The pain is real, but in his sufferings, Job refused to curse God Job 2:10 “*But he said ‘Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity?’ In all this Job did not sin with his lips.*” The same can be said for Jeremiah (Lamentations 3:38-41). David here gave us a clue in verse ⁴ “*Lord, make me to know my end And what is the extent of my days; Let me know how transient I am.*” He understood that he was but a mere הֶבֶל (*hevel*) vapour, and he must wait for the Lord. And that is what we see after this desperate plea. In the next Psalm David proclaims “*I waited patiently for the Lord; And He inclined to me and heard my cry. He brought me up out of the pit of destruction, out of the miry clay, And He set my feet upon a rock making my footsteps firm. He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God; Many will see and fear And will trust in the Lord*” (Psalm 40:1-3).

What about us?

We too do not understand the whole plan of God, nor can we. Our goal is to keep our lips from offending, continue to do what is right, and keep our eyes on Yeshua. I am reminded of the generation that saw the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE. Many suffered greatly and were sold into slavery or were put to death, yet the author of Hebrews writes to them “*fixing our eyes on Yeshua, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart*” (Hebrews 12:2-3). We too come at times under the “*discipline of the Lord*” and are “*reproved by Him.*” Let us keep our eyes on Yeshua, for He will come and rescue us, in His time. Friends let us have a *Selah* (סֵלָה) moment and pause, reflect and pray for one another.

Selah

Shalom in Messiah Yeshua

Paul & Sue