

# WE-VAPE

PSALM 39:1-5 FEBRUARY 21, 2018

Please turn with me to Psalm 39. Last week we began a series on the Jeduthun Psalms. There are 3 Psalms specifically dedicated to an individual: Psalm 39, 62 and 77. And they're all addressed to the same man: Jeduthun, who we took a biographical look at last week and drew a parallel between his calling and our own, as we are given songs and melodies to play through our lives in the service of our King.

The first thing you notice when you read these 3 Psalms is that they are not very cheery. They're not very upbeat. But, they are the songs that were given, on purpose, for the benefit of the kingdom and God's people. And in the hands of a faithful servant, they bore eternal fruit and left a lasting legacy.

Tonight we begin the first of the Jeduthun songs: Psalm 39. It's often called a funeral Psalm, but the message in these verses is far too urgent and important to put off until the day of death. It's about the brevity of life and it preaches the truth that, all too often, human lives are wasted when they are not lived for the Lord.

When you read the verses you quickly find that David was in dark days. He was feeling defeated and discouraged. He was being disciplined by God as a result of his sin and was physically afflicted. As he struggled through this period, it seems he had slipped into a depression. He found himself thinking that there was little point to this short life and that he was never going to find the light at the end of the tunnel.

But David was not only depressed, he also had a problem. He was deeply frustrated, but was afraid what the effect of *voicing* those frustrations might be on the unbelievers around him.

So, that's where we begin in this song. A song, remember, that was hand-delivered to Jeduthun to prepare and present as a melody of praise to the Lord. And as we apply it to our own lives, we want to look first at the immediate issue and then take a moment to consider the ultimate issue.

The immediate issue was that David needed to find a way to conduct himself during a time of spiritual depression.

**Psalm 39:title-1 - To the Chief Musician. To Jeduthun. A Psalm of David. 'I said, "I will guard my ways, Lest I sin with my tongue; I will restrain my mouth with a muzzle, While the wicked are before me."**

David had some things he wanted to get off his chest, but he's concerned that his complaint might move into the area of sin. He especially doesn't want to give the unbelievers around him a reason to mock God or reject Him. "If your God is so loving and so powerful and so true, how could you *possibly* be experiencing the difficulty you're experiencing?"

Now, David has a good goal. His *desire* is great in that he's concerned about his testimony. He wants to be careful about what's coming out of his mouth because he doesn't want to sin against the Lord. But we're going to see that his plan crashes and burns. After putting this plan into action, he's going to end up *worse* than he was before. So, what's the problem? If his goal is good and if he's trying to put a spiritual plan into action, why is he going to sink *deeper* into depression in the following verses?

Well, let's take a look at the plan. He begins with, "*I* said." It's a plan he's made for himself to impose an external set of rules onto his life in hopes that it will solve his spiritual problem. "I'll just keep my mouth shut, and that will keep me from sin." He said, "Here's what *I'm* going to do to prevent myself from doing the wrong thing." It was a human answer to an eternal question.

And, to be fair, he *was* strict and disciplined. He said he was going to *muzzle* himself. If you've ever muzzled a dog, it's a pretty serious way of restraining the dog's activity.

David recognized that his mouth was like a wild animal that could do some serious damage. James talks about this at length in his epistle. And while that is true, the *problem* with David's plan here is that the mouth is not the *source* of the words. The mouth is not the *source* of sin. It's simply the *apparatus* we use to convey thoughts and words. It's just the exit point. So, like all external acts of legalism, David is unwittingly setting himself up for failure because, as he's going to discover, the mouth isn't the real issue. And no human effort can stop the flow of sin that comes from the heart. Notice that there's no mention of God in this opening plan. He mentions sin, yes, but look at how he spoke: *I* said, *I* will guard, *I* will restrain. It's all human effort.

Let's see how it worked out.

**Psalm 39:2 - <sup>2</sup>I was mute with silence, I held my peace even from good; And my sorrow was stirred up.**

This was not the result he was hoping for. His internal misery was not solved, in fact his pain actually *increased!* This term for sorrow indicates an extreme distress and anguish. So, his condition had worsened, but not only that, now no *good* things were coming out either. The praise and thankfulness and honor he loved to give to the Lord were no longer being broadcast from his lips.

These two verses should be the slogan for legalism. A legalist wouldn't admit it, but this is what happens when we try to use external, human efforts to rid ourselves from sin or achieve spirituality. We can't do it through our own strength. And, the things we try to do in order to keep ourselves at some arbitrary level of spirituality actually end up making us worse off like David was here.

In verse 3 David gets down to the heart of the issue, which was *the heart*.

**Psalm 39:3 - <sup>3</sup>My heart was hot within me; While I was musing, the fire burned. Then I spoke with my tongue:**

You see, *the heart* was where the work really needed to be done, not the mouth. Jesus explained in Matthew and Luke that it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks. All David's efforts to muzzle the tongue were simply like trying to put a cork on an active volcano. And we see here in verse 3 that while his vow of silence may have *looked* effective on the outside, pressure was building on the inside. The temperature was rising and the powder keg was about to blow. It was the *heart* that needed operation, not the tongue. If the external behavior was all that needed adjusting, then the Pharisees would be the greatest heroes of the New Testament. Instead, they're the great villains. They were white-washed tombs who spoke of holy things while breathing hatred and murder.

David is at a very troubling point in his spiritual life. And before we see what happens next, let's be encouraged by his testimony. Not because we want to stay in times of discouragement or doubt, not because we want to just give up and say, "Well, not point in being disciplined in our spiritual lives." That's not it. But, in passages like this we see that the *reality* of this life is that there will be times where we will have to deal with some of these troubling things. And God isn't afraid of that. God isn't afraid of or angry with a prayer like, "Lord I believe, help my unbelief." God doesn't want us to try to varnish our relationship with Him or try put on a mask. It's not going to work. David is a great example of someone who was really honest with God. And that didn't make him a *worse* believer. He's a model of intimacy with God! The Lord wants us to relate to Him honestly and personally, even when we're struggling. What He *doesn't* want is for us to bind ourselves up in some legalism or in some manmade plan of human effort to try to fix our spiritual issues. That's the work that *God* does.

In verse 4 we see that when David reached that boiling point, when words *had* to be vented out, he couldn't go on as he was anymore and he made the *right* choice and took his heart and his words to the Lord in prayer.

**Psalm 39:4 - "Lord, make me to know my end, And what *is* the measure of my days, *That I* may know how frail I *am*."**

David was a fast learner. His big plan in verse 1 had been a colossal failure, so now he does not try some other scheme or system to make himself right. He goes to prayer and *immediately* invites God to transform his mindset and his understanding so that he could have the proper perspective.

Through this prayer David admits that he had been looking at things in a wrong way and he recognized that his primary need in the moment was that he get what we call the "mind of Christ".

Let's look at his request for a moment: He asks for some significant inside knowledge. Some commentators write this off and say, "Well, he's not *actually* praying to know the date of his death, he's just praying that he'd be eternally minded." And we do want to make room for the fact that we're dealing with *poetry* here. But, a plain reading shows that David is being pretty bold. And, he's clearly asking that God would *reveal* to him critical things for the sake of his spiritual life. One translation puts it this way: "Make known to me, O Lord, my end and the number of my days, what is it? In order that I would know what I am lacking."

That's a hard prayer to pray for ourselves, but what a *great* prayer for us to pray. What a great about-face from verse 1, where David had made his own plan for spiritual greatness. Now he's asking the Lord to show him just how weak he is.

Knowing our weaknesses isn't a bad thing. In fact, we know from God's word that it is a very *good* thing. Blessed are the poor in spirit. The Spirit helps us in our weakness. God's strength is made perfect in our weakness.

And here, not only is David pivoting from relying on his own strength to relying on the Lord, he's also moving from having a focus on the immediate struggle in his life to having a wider mindset, looking at the ultimate course of his life, which he continues in verse 5:

**Psalm 39:5 - "Indeed, You have made my days as handbreadths, And my age *is* as nothing before You; Certainly every man at his best state *is* but vapor."**

Interesting: He prayed that God would show him his end and the measure of his days, and while there's no indication that God gave him the date of his death, we see that his prayer was somewhat answered in verse 5. The Lord spoke to his heart that, indeed, our lives on the earth are short. A tiny blip on the radar. A thin vapor that vanishes after only a moment.

There were various measurements in Bible times. There was the cubit, which was either elbow to wrist or elbow to fingertips. There was the span, which was the length between the tip of the thumb and the tip of the pinky. And then there was the handbreadth, which was just the width of 4 fingers pressed together. That would be small on it's own, but David was always thinking about the immense magnificence of God and so puts the Lord in the middle of the verse for scale. When we do that, well, even the greatest man alive on earth is as nothing compared to the Lord. The best man at his *best state* is like a puff of mist in front of an eternal God, omnipresent and all-powerful who created heaven and earth.

At the end of verse 5 we see that term that pops up from time to time in the Psalms: Selah. There's debate over the exact purpose and meaning, but it's generally understood as a point where you would stop and consider what has just been said. And so that's where we're going to park for the evening. Let's consider what we've seen so far: We have the immediate and the ultimate on display. In the immediate, David is struggling. We'll find out more about that in the coming verses. But he's distressed and discouraged. Trying to ignore spiritual problems isn't going work. But trying to solve spiritual problems with human solutions won't work either. Legalism and arbitrary, manmade schemes won't draw us closer to God. That work is done by inviting God in to examine our hearts, reveal His will and accomplish His purposes by *His* power.

But then we also see the issue of the ultimate. David thinks about the shortness of life and, in all honesty, it's going to bum him out as the Psalm progresses. But we have to remember how limited his understanding was. David is an inspiration to us, but we're actually in a much better spiritual position than he was. His Bible was the first 6 books of the Old Testament, maybe Job and Judges and then he would've known the story of his great-grandparents Ruth and Boaz. That's it. We have the full revelation of God. 66 books, not just 8 or 9. And so, the thought of life being a vapor does not have to be one of sadness for us. Instead, as we look at what God has done and what He wants to do, it should make us excited to live out this life, no matter how short it may be in comparison to eternity.

It's called a vapor, not just here but also in the New Testament, but that's a great reminder that God *breathes* life into man. Not just Adam and Eve, but you and I as well.

**Job 33:4 - 4 For the Spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life.**

Acts 17 says the same thing and that His desire is to satisfy every need. David looked at the brevity of life and said, "my life is as nothing before the Lord." But we understand from our position that God's point is to make *something* out of our *nothing!*

There is a remarkable and mysterious flower called the *Cereus greggii* or "Arizona's Queen of the Night". They grow in the dry soils of the Southwest. They are mysterious because, for reasons scientists don't understand, these flowers bloom usually all at once on just *one* night a year. They are known for their ethereal, star-like blossoms and, "after giving off their famously hypnotic scent, the

flowers wilt just a few hours later.”<sup>1</sup> In 2015, 1,500 people turned out to a nature preserve in Tuscon, Arizona to witness these flowers bloom with their, get this: Palm-sized blossoms.<sup>2</sup>

These special flowers are fragile and fleeting, but what a sight to see! Now think of how much more important *your* life is in the hands of God. A God who cleanses us of our sin and comforts us in our sorrow, who empowers us to overcome the flesh and the failures of this life and then puts our lives on display that this dark world might see the blossoms of His grace and strength working in us and through us, no matter how short our lives may be. This is our song!

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/see-flowers-bloom-all-once-one-night-year-180955615/>

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*