

Psalm 39: Human frailty



Psalm 39 (38) (Mode 3. 3....12 / 4.....271)

The psalmist is facing death. He tries to restrain himself but cannot, and bursts into a cry to Yahweh for respite. It is a tragic reflection on the human condition. The tension is not resolved and the reflection is indecisive. Its key theme is expressed in the refrain: 'We human beings ('adam) are no more than a mere breath (hebel)'(verses 5 and 11). It has a certain affinity with Qohelet [Ecclesiastes]. 'The living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no more reward, and even the memory of them is lost'(Ecclesiastes 9:5).

‘Those of low estate are but a breath,
those of high estate are a delusion;
in the balances they go up;
they are together lighter than a breath’(Psalm 62:9).

‘Human beings are like a breath;
their days are like a passing shadow’(Psalm 144:4).

I said to myself: 'I will watch my behaviour
lest I sin with my tongue.

I will control what I say
when confronted by the wicked.'

I was silent and held myself back,
but to no avail.

The prosperity of the wicked stirred my grief,
my heart was burning within me.

While I was attempting control
the fire inside me blazed.

I found myself
unable to hold my tongue.

‘If I say, “I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,” then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot’(Jeremiah 20:9).

'Lord, what will become of me?
How fleeting is my life!
A short span you have given me.
My days are as nothing in your sight.

We human beings ['adam]
are no more than a breath. [hebel]

‘Whatever comes from earth returns to earth;
so the ungodly go from curse to destruction.
The human body is a fleeting thing’(Sirach 41:10-11).

‘The days of our life are seventy years,
or perhaps eighty, if we are strong;
even then their span is only toil and trouble;
they are soon gone, and we fly away’(Psalm 90:10).

Wisdom 2:1-5

‘They reasoned unsoundly, saying to themselves: Short and sorrowful is our life, and there is no remedy when a life comes to its end, and no one has been known to return from Hades. For we were born by mere chance, and hereafter we shall be as though we had never been, for the breath in our nostrils is smoke, and reason is a spark kindled by the beating of our hearts; when it is extinguished, the body will turn to ashes, and the spirit will dissolve like empty air.’

Wisdom 2:1-5

‘Our name will be forgotten in time, and no one will remember our works; our life will pass away like the traces of a cloud, and be scattered like mist that is dispersed by the rays of the sun and overcome by its heat. For our allotted time is the passing of a shadow, and there is no return from our death, because it is sealed up and no one turns back.’

‘Hard work was created for everyone, and a heavy yoke is laid on the children of Adam, from the day they come forth from their mother’s womb until the day they return to the mother of all the living. Perplexities and fear of heart are theirs, and anxious thought of the day of their death’(Sirach 40:1-2).

We pass away like a shadow,
our life passes by.

We amass possessions,
not knowing who will enjoy them.'

The rest of the psalm focuses on sin and punishment. We find a reflection followed by a request, followed by a further reflection and a further request, and concluding with a reflection. Once again we are confronted by a dilemma: Do I speak to God, do I speak with God or do I remain silent? The tension remains: is it a matter of acceptance or resignation?

So what am I waiting for?

Lord, my hope is in you.

Free me from all my transgressions.

Do not make me the taunt of the fool.

I am silent. I do not open my mouth,
since this is all your doing.

Stop tormenting me.

I am worn down by the blows of your hand.

You chastise us in our guilt,

like a moth consuming what we treasure.

We human beings

are no more than a breath.

Hear my prayer, O Lord,
attend to my cry.

Do not ignore my tears.

For I am your guest,
a stranger passing by
like all who have gone before me.

Look away that I may breathe again,
before I depart and am no more.

‘Come, let us return to the Lord; for it is he who
has torn, and he will heal us; he has struck down,
and he will bind us up’(Hosea 6:1).

Job 7:6-21

‘My days are swifter than a weaver’s shuttle,
and come to their end without hope.

Remember that my life is a breath;
my eye will never again see good.

The eye that beholds me will see me no more;
while your eyes are upon me, I shall be gone.

As the cloud fades and vanishes,
so those who go down to Sheol do not come up;
they return no more to their houses,
nor do their places know them any more.

Job 7:6-21

Therefore I will not restrain my mouth;
I will speak in the anguish of my spirit;
I will complain in the bitterness of my soul.
Am I the Sea, or the Dragon,
that you set a guard over me?
‘When I say, “My bed will comfort me,
my couch will ease my complaint,”
then you scare me with dreams
and terrify me with visions,
so that I would choose strangling and death
rather than this body.

Job 7:6-21

I loathe my life; I would not live forever.

Let me alone, for my days are a breath.

What are human beings,

that you make so much of them,

that you set your mind on them,

visit them every morning,

test them every moment?

Will you not look away from me for a while,

let me alone until I swallow my spittle?

If I sin, what do I do to you, you watcher of humanity?

Why have you made me your target?

Why have I become a burden to you?

Job 7:6-21

Will you not look away from me for a while,
let me alone until I swallow my spittle?

If I sin, what do I do to you,
you watcher of humanity?

Why have you made me your target?

Why have I become a burden to you?

Why not pardon my transgression
and take away my iniquity?

For now I shall lie in the earth;
you will seek me, but I shall not be.

Job 10:20-21

‘Are not the days of my life few?

Let me alone, that I may find a little comfort,
before I go, never to return,
to the land of gloom and deep darkness.’

Job 14:1-6

‘A mortal, born of woman,
few of days and full of trouble,
comes up like a flower and withers,
flees like a shadow and does not last.
Do you fix your eyes on such a one?
Do you bring me into judgment with you?
Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean?
No one can. Since their days are determined,
and the number of their months is known to you,
and you have appointed the bounds
that they cannot pass,
look away from them, and desist,
that they may enjoy, like labourers, their days.’

Praying this psalm as a Christian we remember that Jesus, like Abel, died prematurely (Hebrews 12:24).

Like the psalmist, Jesus did not open his mouth (Mark 14:61), and Jesus, too, cried out that the cup might pass away (Mark 14:36).

Jesus placed his hope in God, knowing-in-faith that he was passing from this world to the Father (John 17:13).