

# Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs: The Master Musician's Melodies

Bereans Sunday School  
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## Psalm 39 — Life is Just a Breath

### 1.0 Introducing Psalm 39

- Psalms 38–40 are related by the themes of waiting and prayer in Psalms 38 and 39 and the answer to that prayer in Psalm 40.
  - ▶ Psalms 38 and 39 conclude with pleas for relief (38:21-22; 39:12-13).
  - ▶ What other similarities can you find between Psalms 38 and 39?
  - ▶ Psalm 40:1-2 speaks of the David's troubles and reveals the relief.
  - ▶ Left at death's door in Psalm 39:12-13, David refers to his rescue from death in Psalm 40:2.
  - ▶ The Lord puts a new song (40:3) into David's silent mouth (39:1-2, 9).
- Book One (Psalms 1–41) of the Psalter closes with requests for relief from life's many afflictions and the assurance of salvation from God (cp. 40:13-17; 41:1-3, 11-12).

### 2.0 Reading Psalm 39 (NAU)

A Psalm of David.

- 39:1** 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.”
- 39:2** I was mute and silent,  
I refrained *even* from good,  
And my sorrow grew worse.

- 39:3** My heart was hot within me,  
While I was musing the fire burned;  
*Then* I spoke with my tongue:
- 39:4** “LORD, make me to know my end  
And what is the extent of my days;  
Let me know how transient I am.
- 39:5** “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.**
- 39:6** “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.
- 39:7** “**And now, Lord, for what do I wait?**  
**My hope is in You.**
- 39:8** “Deliver me from all my transgressions;  
Make me not the reproach of the foolish.
- 39:9** “I have become mute,  
I do not open my mouth,  
Because it is You who have done *it*.
- 39:10** “Remove Your plague from me;  
Because of the opposition of Your hand I am perishing.
- 39:11** “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.**
- 39:12** “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.
- 39:13** “Turn Your gaze away from me, that I may smile *again*  
Before I depart and am no more.”  
For the choir director.

### 3.0 Understanding Psalm 39

#### 3.1 Outline

- I. David’s Tormented Silence (vv. 1-3)
- II. David’s Transient Life (vv. 4-6)
- III. David’s Trust-Filled Silence (vv. 7-11)
- IV. David’s Tenuous Life (vv. 12-13)



- Vv. 1-3: Bracketed by “with my tongue” (an inclusio).
- Vv. 4-6 and 7-11: Close with statements utilizing “Surely” and “mere breath” (a key word in Ecclesiastes, *hebel*) accompanied by the call to meditation, “Selah” (see Psalm 9:16).

### 3.2 Notes

- v. 3 Burning Questions
  - “But the determination to keep silent, even on ‘good matters’ (v 3b) or safe ground, was too much for him. The questions were burning within him and couldn’t be contained (cf. Jer 20:9).”—Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1983), 309.
  - “While his heart was musing it was fusing, for the subject was confusing.”—Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, 3 vols. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, n.d.), 1/2:215.
  - As David frames his questions, he begins to understand the answers. Prayer is one of God’s means of teaching us.
  - See Philippians 4:6-7.



- v. 5 “handbreadths”
  - In the ancient Hebrew system of measurements the handbreadth (4 fingers, approximately 3-4 inches) was one of the smallest measurements of length (1 Kings 7:26).
  - “By beginning to perceive clearly the transitory nature of human existence, the psalmist was also beginning to gain a broader perspective within which to interpret its difficulties and hardships; value in life and appreciation of life must somehow be grasped within a full knowledge of its transitory nature.”—Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 309.
- v. 5 “Surely”
  - Note how this strong assertion recurs in verses 6 (2x) and 11.
  - See Psalm 23:6.
- v. 7 “And now, Lord”
  - In the Hebrew this is an emphatic transition highlighting the logical consequence of what David has been saying.
  - God is the Master (“Lord”) of David and of his situation.
  - The declaration of hope is equally emphatic.
- v. 9 Silence of a Different Kind
  - In verses 1-2 David shuts his mouth and refrains from speaking out of fear sinning by his words.
  - In verse 9 David is silent because he now understands how God has been working behind the scenes.

- **v. 12** “stranger ... sojourner”
  - The “stranger” and “sojourner” are alien residents in a foreign land. The former’s status was permanent and the latter’s was temporary.
  - Neither one could live in their adopted land without the permission of its inhabitants. Both had certain protections and rights, but never had full legal status and had no permanent right to possess land or buildings.
  - See Leviticus 25:23 and 1 Chronicles 29:15.
  - See Hebrews 11:13 and 1 Peter 2:11.
  
- **v. 13** “Turn Your gaze away from me”
  - See Job 7:19 and 10:20-21.
  - “Instead of worrying about where God has fixed his eyes, we should be concerned about where our eyes are fixed and should fix them on God himself, on the Lord Jesus Christ, and on that eternal city yet to come (Heb. 11:10). That is what it means rightly to number our days and to apply our hearts to true wisdom.”—James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1994).

#### 4.0 Singing Psalm 39

Teach me the measure of my days,  
Thou Maker of my frame;  
I would survey life’s narrow space,  
And learn how frail I am.

A span is all that we can boast,  
An inch or two of time;  
Man is but vanity and dust  
In all his flower and prime.

See the vain race of mortals move  
Like shadows o’er the plain;  
They rage and strive, desire and love,  
But all the noise is vain.

Some walk in honor’s gaudy show,  
Some dig for golden ore;  
They toil for heirs, they know not who,  
And straight are seen no more.

Now I forbid my carnal hope,  
My fond desires recall;  
I give my mortal interest up,  
And make my God my all.



**Tunes**

“Amazing Grace”  
—  
“The Lord’s My Shepherd”  
—  
“Alas and Did My Savior  
Bleed?” (melody only,  
no refrain)  
—  
“Jesus, the Very Thought  
of Thee”

What should I wish or wait for, then,  
From creatures earth and dust?  
They make our expectations vain,  
And disappoint our trust.

— Isaac Watts, *Psalms of David* (1719)

### **5.0 Praying Psalm 39**

- O God, help me understand my own mortality. [v. 4]
- Lord, my hope is in You. [v. 7]
- Save me from my sins and their effects. [v. 8]
- Father, hear my prayer. [v. 12]



### **6.0 Applying Psalm 39**

- We must live our short lives with a proper perspective of our existence.
- Life's meaning and purpose must be found in God's purpose for us (James 4:13-16).
- We are but pilgrims and sojourners in this world; our permanence and our hope is found in God alone.

“This humble recognition that God is at once judge and deliverer is what the Old Testament means by the ‘fear of the LORD’—the admission that one has no hope in self or others but only as God offers it.”

—Gerald A. Wilson, *Psalms Volume 1*,  
NIV Application Commentary  
(Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2002), 633.