

Psalm Thirty-Nine

I said, "I will watch my ways
and keep my tongue from sin;
I will put a muzzle on my mouth
while in the presence of the wicked."
So I remained utterly silent,
not even saying anything good.
But my anguish increased;
my heart grew hot within me.
While I meditated, the fire burned;
then I spoke with my tongue:

"Show me, LORD, my life's end
and the number of my days;
let me know how fleeting my life is.
You have made my days a mere handbreadth;
the span of my years is as nothing before you.
Everyone is but a breath,
even those who seem secure.

"Surely everyone goes around like a mere phantom;
in vain they rush about, heaping up wealth
without knowing whose it will finally be.

"But now, Lord, what do I look for?
My hope is in you.
Save me from all my transgressions;
do not make me the scorn of fools.
I was silent; I would not open my mouth,
for you are the one who has done this.
Remove your scourge from me;
I am overcome by the blow of your hand.
When you rebuke and discipline anyone for their sin,
you consume their wealth like a moth—
surely everyone is but a breath.

"Hear my prayer, LORD,
listen to my cry for help;
do not be deaf to my weeping.
I dwell with you as a foreigner,
a stranger, as all my ancestors were.
Look away from me, that I may enjoy life again
before I depart and am no more."

For a while this spring, Meg and I have been watching travel shows. As far as considering options went, I was probably more interested in them than her. But she obliged me. After so long in lockdown or an equivalent of it, I was tired of being confined to the same place. I heard this from a few people who made similar viewing choices during the past several months. I wanted to be entertained with the possibility of going somewhere else – somewhere outside of our neighborhood, city and province that we've all been limited to for so long.

In Psalm Thirty-Nine we encounter the person of faith as a “passing guest, an alien” (v. 12b). The God-fearing, we are told, are travelers in the world. A traveler, by definition, is someone who comes to a place and remains there for a short time before leaving to a more long-term residence.

The hosts of the documentary series that we watched provide examples of this. Their stay in any given location – whether it be Iceland or Thailand - is temporary. They are there for a few days or weeks before heading off to the next destination, or returning home.

The psalm-writer seeks to be reminded and to remind readers of this reality, as it applies to life more broadly within a spiritual universe. “Let me know my end, and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting my life is” (v. 4). A lifetime is like a single breath. It measures only inches across. Seen from above, it is next to nothing (v. 5).

Were it not for the eternity of God, and the mystery of life in God beyond this life, these lines would make for little more than a depressing song, and one which ends on a particularly dark note. It is when the brevity of our time here on earth is viewed within and contrasted against the broadness of something more expansive that the psalm's meaning becomes one of hope.

Psalm Thirty-Nine is part of a long tradition, when it comes to this theme. We might be reminded of the book of Ecclesiastes or of the words of Psalm Ninety – “teach us to count our days, that we may gain a wise heart” (v. 12). Likewise, some of the early Christian writings may come to mind. The first followers of Jesus saw both their spiritual ancestors and themselves as foreigners, strangers and exiles (Hebrews 11:13, 1 Peter 2:11).

This provided a means of assurance for them. The awareness of their mortality and acceptance of their numbered years allowed them to understand that they were on pilgrimage. They were only passing through. They were on earth on a visa and with a passport from another place (Philippians 3:20). This meant that the difficulties of this time could be seen as just that – *of this time*. They knew that this time was not the only time and that they had a lasting dwelling place in God (Psalm 90:1).

It also guided their lives towards faithfulness in the present. Because travelers act differently than those who have a fixed address in a place. They travel lightly, for one thing. I suspect that the celebrities on my screen had staff who hauled around far more luggage than the suitcases they showed. Still, they carry less than if they lived there. Travelers also move about the world with a different pace and intention. They do not set down deep roots.

Psalm Thirty-Nine presents the prayer of someone suffering and near to death. It is perhaps in those times, especially, that we would do well to be reminded of our identity as spiritual visitors. It is then that we can turn to God, and in the midst of our frustration and desperation say, “my hope is in you.” (v. 7) – NS

For this meditation, I relied on James H. Waltner's commentary on the Psalms (Herald).