

STUDIES IN PSALMS

PSALM 39

DESCRIPTIVE TITLE

The Lament and Prayer of a Divinely Stricken One.

ANALYSIS

Stanza I., vers. 1-3, How the Stricken One's Resolve to be Silent is Broken. Stanza II., vers. 4-6, Lament that Life, already Short, should be further Shortened. Stanza III., vers. 7-11, Prayer for Pardon and Healing, with a recognition of the Marring Effect of the Disease. Stanza IV., vers. 12, 13, Supplementary and Subdued Prayer for Help.

(Lm.) Psalm—By David.

- 1 I said—"Let me take heed to my ways—
that I sin not with my tongue,
Let me restrain my mouth—¹
while a lawless man is before me."
- 2 I was dumb with silence—
I abstained from blessing;
But my pain had been stirred—
- 3 hot was my heart within me:
As I murmured there was kindled a fire—
I spake with my tongue.
- 4 "Let me know O Jehovah mine end—
and the measure of my days what it is:
I would fain know why forsaken² am I.
- 5 Lo! as handbreadths thou hast given my days,
And my life-time was as nothing before thee:
- 6 Only a vapour is any man though set firm,
Only in semblance doth any man march to and fro,
Only a vapour that he should make a commotion:
He heapeth things up and knoweth not who shall carry them
off!"
- 7 Now therefore for what have I waited Sovereign Lord"?
as for my hope thine it is!

1. MI.: "Let me put (so *Gt.*—*Gn.*) to my mouth a muzzle."

2. Same word as "rejected" in Isa. 53:3. Cp. Thirtle, O.T.P., 186; and see Ps. 38:10, 11.

3. Some cod. (w. 2 ear. pr. edns., Aram. and Syr.): "Jehovah"—*Gn.*

PSALM THIRTY-NINE

- 8 From all my transgressions rescue me,
the reproach of the vile¹ do not make me.
- 9 I am dumb I will not open my mouth—
for thou didst it!
- 10 Remove from off me thy stroke,²
through the hostility of thy hand I am spent.
- 11 When by rebukes for iniquity thou hast corrected a man
then hast thou consumed as a moth his comeliness.
Only a vapour is any man!
- 12 Oh hear my prayer Jehovah!
and unto my cry for help oh give ear!
at my tears do not be silent;
For a sojourner am I with thee,
a settler, like all my fathers.
- 13 Look away from me that I may brighten up,
ere yet I depart and be no more.

(Lm.) To the Chief Musician.

PARAPHRASE

PSALM 39

I said to myself, I'm going to quit complaining! I'll keep quiet, especially when the ungodly are around me.

2, 3 But as I stood there silently, the turmoil within me grew to the bursting point. The more I mused, the hotter the fires inside. Then at last I spoke, and pled with God:

4 Lord, help me to realize how brief my time on earth will be! Help me to know that I am here for but a moment more.

5, 6 My life is no longer than my hand! My whole lifetime is but a moment to You. Proud man! Frail as breath! A shadow! And all his busy rushing ends in nothing. He heaps up riches for someone else to spend.

7 And so, Lord, my only hope is in You.

8 Save me from being overpowered by my sins, for even fools will mock me then.

9 Lord, I am speechless before You. I will not open my mouth to speak one word of complaint, for my punishment is from You.³

1. Or: "senseless"—Dr.

2. See note on 38:11 (same word here).

3. Literally, "for You have done it."

STUDIES IN PSALMS

10 Lord, don't hit me anymore—I am exhausted beneath Your hand.

11 When You punish a man for his sins, he is destroyed; for he is as fragile as a moth-infested cloth; yes, man is frail as breath.

12 Hear my prayer, O Lord; listen to my cry! Don't sit back, unmindful of my tears! For I am Your guest! I am a traveler passing through the earth, as all my fathers were!

13 Spare me, Lord! Let me recover and be filled with happiness again before my death.

EXPOSITION

The first thing in this psalm to arrest our attention is its likeliness to the previous psalm; and then, the next thing, its unlikeness; which, indeed, is so great as to divert attention from its similarity. To describe this psalm, as some have done, as merely an Elegy on The Vanity of Life, is quite to miss its especial characteristic. First and foremost it is the Wail of one who has been Stricken of God with a plague on account of Transgression. The Vanity of Life is merely the background of the picture, to enhance the pity of it, that one who in any case had but a short life to live should have his *comeliness* disfigured and his life made shorter still. The plague—probably leprosy—which appeared in Ps. 38, re-appears here in Ph. 39: that is the striking but greatly overlooked fact. As will be seen, the same technical word (*nega'*) which was used in ver. 11 of the previous psalm, is again used in ver. 10 of this; and as, there, a descriptive confirmation was found (vers. 10 and 11) giving unmistakable effect to the suspicious word, so here an equally sure confirmation of it is discovered in the unquestionable allusion to his own marred looks in ver. 11. To catch this reference to his own lamentable bodily condition, is to feel a new point in his plea that he might have declared to him the *measure of his days*. He already knew the ordinary brevity of human life, and feels it so strongly that he employs it as a refrain; but, for that very reason, he was not likely, in an ordinary way, to make it the point of a special petition. But now, as the case is, he would be glad to know the worst. Hence it can be no longer open to question that, as in the previous psalm, so in this,—the petitioner has fallen under the punitive *stroke* of Divine displeasure.

PSALM THIRTY-NINE

It is just when this similarity has been put beyond further question, that our apprehension of the wide contrast between the two psalms becomes keen and inquisitive. Is this *another* plague-stricken psalmist; or if the same, what has happened to impart such a different tone to his present effusion? The similarity being conceded, the contrast is so great as to become almost startling. There, enemies were in evidence: here, there are none. There, all was excitement and turmoil: here, all is as restful as it is sad. There, no general reflections on the brevity of life were indulged in: here, they abound, and are set forth so forcibly as to mislead the casual reader into the mistake of regarding this composition as a dirge to the note of "Vanity of vanities! all is vanity!" Besides all which, there is a tone of resignation here, and an extreme moderation of request, which are in the greatest contrast with the previous psalm.

How is this contrast to be accounted for? Is the writer of this psalm *another man* than he that wrote the previous? But for the inscription, we should quite readily have come to that conclusion; and should have unhesitatingly fixed upon the leper-King Uzziah as the probable author. We should have called attention to the probable fact that Uzziah was smitten for life—which would have accounted for his resignation and for his seeming to say: "And if there may be no complete and early *removal* of the *stroke*, let there be at least a *brightening up* before I go hence." This, too would have given especial point to the seeming apprehension of the sufferer that he might, in his distress be overheard by an attendant apparently *sinning with his tongue*. The previous psalm, however, warns us against being hasty in concluding against the authorship of David, even here. According to that psalm, his wives withdrew from him, his lovers and friends stood aloof, his neighbours kept at a distance; and, under these circumstances, although David may not have been formally banished to a "several" house like that to which Uzziah had to retire, he may have been confined to his own apartments during his sickness, and may have had ample opportunities to *bridle his tongue* while uncertain attendants were *in his presence*. Then, moreover, it must be remembered that sick people are proverbially subject to moody fluctuations—fiery one day; subdued the next; besides which, time works wonders,—by giving space for reflection; and reflection, on a sensitive mind like David's, may have added to the wonder, by soon trans-

STUDIES IN PSALMS

forming the high-spirited and resentful statesman of the 38th psalm, into the resigned and patient moraliser of the 39th; especially may this have in part come about by influences due to changing circumstances in the state: as, for instance, by a recrudescence of the bodily plague, after Absaloms' rebellion had become a thing of the past, when the sadder but wiser king had ample time and increased motive to dwell, as he had never done, on the vanity of human life. It is, in any case, significant, that, in his pathetic address on the consecration of the offerings for the building of Solomon's temple as recorded in 1 Ch. 29:15, the venerable monarch should, in fellowship with his people, have used language *precisely similar* to that which closes this psalm: language which we shall do well to keep in mind, as suggesting that Messianic hope did not always run high in Israel, and, indeed, by the very reaction of its occasional brilliance was apt to make it appear that only in this life had those ancients hope in Jehovah their God—that they were, indeed, for a brief span, *sojourners* and *settlers* with their God in the enjoyment of the good things of his house; and then departed into the land of forgetfulness.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. There are so many books to help you in your study of the psalms. Many of them will ask you to divide the psalm into many divisions and sub-divisions—how would this psalm divide? What is the theme of this psalm?
2. What was it that stirred David so intently? Wasn't it the awful inequalities of life? Read verses one thru three with the thought of two or three of our present day problems. One might begin with the fantastic outlay of money for material advantages while the cause of Christ limps along for want of finance—or is this the problem? Discuss.
3. Are verses four through six the expression of what finally burst forth?—it hardly seems so. Discuss.
4. If we had the date of our death before us—would it help? If we could hold the two dates usually inscribed upon the tombstone—if we could hold these dates in our hand while we lived in the Spirit World of eternity—of infinity we might relax our feverish efforts. Is this the thought of verse four? Discuss.

PSALM THIRTY-NINE AND FORTY

5. The brevity of life is described with some very graphic figures: (1) A hand breadth (2) A breath (3) A shadow. Discuss the meaning to life now.
6. The *only hope* of man is in the Lord. How eternally—presently—personally true this is! Discuss by reading verses seven through eleven.
7. David says of man that he is a “house guest” of God. Read verses 12 and 13 and discuss.

PSALM 40

DESCRIPTIVE TITLE

Three Stirring Reminiscences of King David's History.

ANALYSIS

Part I., Significant Memorials of David's Coronation. Stanza I., vers. 1-3, A highly Figurative Description of David's Deliverance from being an Outlaw to being King. Stanza II., vers. 4, 5, Felicitations to All who Trust in Jehovah, prompted by David's Own Experience, awaken Glad Memories of the Past, and Adoring Anticipations of the Future. Stanzas III. and IV., vers. 6-9, 10, 11, David's Profound Apprehension of his Kingly Calling makes of him a Proclaimer of Jehovah's Righteousness to an ever-Enlarging Assembly.

Part II., A Significant fragmentary Memento of David's Sin, ver. 12.

Part III., King David in Trouble. Stanza I., vers. 13-15, Prayer against his Enemies. Stanza II., vers. 16, 17, Prayer in Favour of his Friends. In both stanzas the Note of Urgency is struck.

(Lm.) By David—Psalm.¹
(Part I.)

- 1 I waited intently for Jehovah—
and he inclined unto me,²
- 2 And brought me up out of the roaring³ pit—
out of the swampy mire;
And set up on a cliff my feet—
making firm my steps;

1. Some cod.: “Psalm—By David”—Gn.

2. M.T. adds: “and heard my cry for help.”

3. See Intro., Chap. III., “Earth.” According to a slightly different reading: “destroying.”