

Psalm 39 – Life is Short. Play Hard!?

Intro – Life is Short. Play hard!

In the 90s, Reebok ran an ad campaign with the slogan, 'Life is Short; Play Hard'. I wonder if you remember it? It was saying, we only have a limited time on this earth, so throw yourself into everything you do. It was very successful, because lots of people have this fear that we'll miss out on life. What they call 'FOMO – Fear Of Missing Out'. Whether you're young or old, go hard because you never know when your time is up. It was also pretty good for their sales. Because you could be slob on the couch, but if you bought some new Reebok shoes, maybe you'd start exercising!

In 2002, Xbox came out with another ad, building on the same idea. It was really graphic, because it had this woman trying to give birth. But then the baby comes flying out and shoots through the window into the air. As it's hurtling through the sky, the baby becomes a boy, then a man, and then an old man as he begins hurtling back down towards the ground. In the last scene you see his teeth start to decay before he finally crashes into his own grave. And the words flash on the screen: 'Life is Short. Play More. Xbox.' It was so graphic that it was banned a few months later. Well is that what we should do? If life is short, just enjoy it as much as you can?

Well in today's passage, we see that David agrees that life is short. But while the world says, 'Life is Short. Play Hard!' The Bible says, 'Life is Short, Live for Eternity.' I was really tempted to say, 'Life is Short. Pray Hard' but it's not quite accurate!

1. Turn to God in Suffering

Last week in Psalm 38, we saw that David was suffering for his sin. He was humble and didn't speak, even to answer his enemies because he knew he had done the wrong thing. He didn't want to reflect badly on God before sinners. This week, David can't keep silent anymore. His suffering is so bad that he can't keep it in.

Psalm 39:2-3 So I remained utterly silent, not even saying anything good. But my anguish increased; ³my heart grew hot within me. While I meditated, the fire burned; then I spoke with my tongue:

Before we look at what he says, what's amazing is that he doesn't speak publicly, but privately to God. He asks God to show him how short life is. Even in his great distress and bitterness, he doesn't dishonour God. His first instinct is to turn to God, and he asks for the wisdom to live his life well. I think we can all be challenged by this.

We live in an age of social media where everyone shares their news, opinions and rants. How easy it is to respond to something that offends you with an angry reply. But once it's out there, it's public, and you can't take it back. Even when people have tried to delete their posts, sometimes people have taken a screenshot and re-posted it. Let's learn from David and turn to the only One who can actually help us.

Brothers and sisters, whatever we do reflects on God, whether badly or well. Let's be wise in the way we speak when we're upset. And let us bring our bitterness and complaints to God, because he cares for us, and is in control of the whole universe.

2. Suffering Shows us Life is Short

As David experiences suffering, he realises it's good to think about how short life is. Most people don't want to think about death. Because death means the end of all enjoyment. We don't want to die before we get to experience life, have the chance to get married, enjoy sex, be successful in our jobs. That's why it's hard to talk to people about Jesus. Because his kingdom is not of this world, but the world to come.

The world wants to distract us with chasing after things. The whole point of advertising is to make us feel like we need whatever it is they are selling. We need the latest bike or beauty products; the best computer or clothes. We won't be complete until we have them! Of course the advertisers are doing that to make money, because they think they won't be happy unless they make more money. But we just chase the next thing, and the next thing, never stopping to think about life.

Or if we're not chasing something, we are amusing ourselves to death. Did you know that the word 'amuse' means 'not musing'. To muse means to 'think, consider, meditate' about life. But amusement is what we do to avoid thinking. We amuse ourselves with movies and Netflix, Facebook and Twitter. We hate to be bored, because we might just realise how empty our lives are.

But David actually shows us that wisdom is in stopping to think about how short life is. This whole psalm is so much like Ecclesiastes, it makes you realise that Solomon wasn't the first one to think about these things. David says:

Psalm 39:4-6 *Show me, Lord, my life's end and the number of my days; let me know how fleeting my life is. ⁵You 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. ⁶"Surely everyone goes around like a mere phantom; in vain they rush about, heaping up wealth without knowing whose it will finally be.*

See most of life is a frantic busyness, heaping up wealth while not thinking about who will get it when we die. At the end of v. 5, we see a musical term *Selah*. While we're not 100% sure what this means, most people think it's a musical interlude, so you can stop, pause and consider the meaning of what you've just sung. We're to consider that our lives are but a breath. 'All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the Word of the LORD endures forever.'¹

The world says, 'Life is Short, Play Hard.' But the Bible tells us, 'Life is Short; Live Wisely'. And what does it mean to live wisely? Well let's keep exploring the psalm. But for now we see that it's wise to stop and think about how short life is. Or as Ecclesiastes puts it, 'It is better to go to a house of mourning, than a house of feasting. For death is the destiny of everyone; the living should take this to heart.'²

The coronavirus is horrible, but one good thing that has come out of it is that people are thinking about life. It's short, it's fragile, we're not in control. In our outreach training we're going to be look at the question of

¹ Isaiah 40:6-8

² Ecclesiastes 7:2

'How do we use this time to point people to the answers the Bible gives?' Because people are searching right now. We can show by our calmness and faith that we know One who is in control.

3. Suffering makes us question God's ways

This psalm takes a really honest view of suffering. And one of the things we all think about when we go through suffering is, 'Why me?' I mean, we are so tiny. So insignificant. If we are just a breath, why does God pay so much attention to us? Nothing I do can possibly affect him. Why does he have to discipline me? David is weary with suffering and he cries out:

Psalm 39:10-11 Remove your scourge from me; I am overcome by the blow of your hand. ¹¹ When you rebuke and discipline anyone for their sin, you consume their wealth like a moth— surely everyone is but a breath.

Sometimes we collect wealth for ourselves, and God disciplines us by taking it away. We knit beautiful scarves for all our idols, but God sends the moth of discipline to demolish them. But can't he just give us a break? You can feel the anguish can't you? I wonder if you even feel like this sometimes? Why do bad things keep happening to me? Why is God disciplining me so much? Surely I've learned my lesson. Enough already. I'm a speck of dust on a flea. Why does he bother with me?

The Psalm ends in bitterness, telling God to leave him alone:

Psalm 39:13 Look away from me, that I may enjoy life again before I depart and am no more."

Isn't this how we feel sometimes. That God just has it in for me. And if he just left me alone I could enjoy life a little before I die. It's so encouraging that even the Bible writers struggled to trust God in their suffering. And God doesn't tell them, 'You can't talk to me like that!' No he wants us to be honest with him. It's better to turn to him, even in bitterness, than turning away from him.

But in his better moments, David does realise that his suffering is not punishment. He calls it discipline. And that's a great word. Because parents don't punish their children to hurt them, or because they enjoy it. They discipline them for their good, so they can grow in their character. This actually shows how precious we are to God. And that's the paradox of human life. We are a mere breath. We are here today and gone tomorrow. But we are created in the image of God. To become his children and learn to love like he does, so we can live with him forever. We are creatures of dust, yet created for eternal glory.

Why does God care so much about such small creatures? Because what we do here, echoes into eternity. Which leads us to our final point:

4. Suffering makes us look to eternity

Even though David despairs of life, it does make him look for hope in God. As painful as this life can be, God uses this suffering to make us look for hope beyond the grave.

Psalm 39:7 But now, Lord, what do I look for? My hope is in you.

It literally says, 'O Lord, for what do I wait?' In other words, there is nothing of substance worth looking forward to in this life. You are the only one who gives hope; who gives meaning to life. Even though God took

away what is dear to him, it's made him realise that everything in this life is temporary. And in fact, he's a temporary resident in this world. And so he cries out to God for hope beyond this world:

Psalm 39:12 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.

We are all strangers and foreigners in this world. He recalls his ancestors like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They were given the whole of Canaan as a promise, but they dwelled as aliens and strangers in the land. Through their example, we learn that we're not to look to earthly blessings, but to eternity. So we can say, 'Life is Short. Live for Eternity! The book of Hebrews puts it this way:

Hebrews 11:13-16 All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. ¹⁴ People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

Can you and I honestly say that we long for eternity? When things are going well, we don't long for heaven! So God disciplines us so that we don't too comfortable here. He takes away our earthly treasures, so that we realise this world isn't our home. I heard a great Colin song this week 'The things of the Lord'. It's actually an old song but I'd never heard it because it's not that popular. It says, 'All that stuff is gonna be trash. Only the things of the Lord will last.' We are aliens and strangers here, because our citizenship is in heaven.

Brothers and sisters, God knows this world is full of suffering, and he is not distant from our suffering. In fact he has shared in the suffering of this world through the life and death of Jesus. And he uses everything that happens to us to prepare us for eternity. He knows that we can't enter his holy kingdom without having our sins washed clean. So he uses our suffering to turn us back to him. As David cries out:

Psalm 39:8 Save me from all my transgressions; do not make me the scorn of fools.

And we know that he has saved us, because Jesus has suffered for all our sins. And now we have Jesus as an example, so that we do not give up. As we look to Jesus, we see the ultimate example of someone who suffered, living for eternity. Again the book of Hebrews puts it beautifully:

Hebrews 12:1-3 And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, ²fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³ Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

In his short life, Jesus had perfect clarity about his mission. It was to suffer and die to save us. It was all for the joy of sharing eternity with us. Life is Short. Live for Eternity.

We do not suffer because God is toying with us, or punishing us. We suffer so that we will see how short life is. So that we will not live for the temporary pleasures of this world. But that we can be refined and prepared for the infinite joy of eternal life with Jesus Christ our Lord. Let's pray.