LIFE IS TOO SHORT
PSALM 39

MAIN IDEA
Life is too short to chase after things that have no value in eternity.

I. TOO SHORT TO FOCUS ON WHAT OTHERS HAVE (VS 1-3)
FOCUSING ON THE SUCCESS OF THE WICKED IS A WASTE OF TIME AND ENERGY.

A. FOCUSED ON THE WICKED (1-2a)
B. SEETHING OVER THE WICKED (2b-3)

II. TOO SHORT TO WASTE TIME (VS 4-6)
SINCE LIFE IS SO SHORT, WE NEED TO EVALUATE WHAT WE ARE SPENDING OUR TIME ON.

A. LIFE REALLY IS SHORT (4-5)
B. TOO SHORT TO WASTE ON THINGS THAT DON’T LAST (6)

III. TOO SHORT NOT TO CHANGE COURSE (VS 7-11)
WHEN WE REALIZE THAT WE HAVE BEEN CHASING AFTER THE WORTHLESS IDOLS OF THIS WORLD, WE NEED TO CHANGE COURSE AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE.

A. CHANGING COURSE (7-8)
B. MOTIVATION TO CHANGE COURSE (9-11)

IV. TOO SHORT TO POSTPONE CHANGE (VS 12-13)
LIFE IS TOO SHORT TO REMAIN ALIENATED FROM GOD FOR EVEN A MINUTE.

A. A PRAYER FOR HELP (12)
B. A PRAYER FOR RESTORATION (13)
Life Is Too Short
Psalm 39

Many commentators think that Psalm 39 is a continuation of Psalm 38. I’m not convinced that’s the case. I don’t think that Psalm 39 is as dark and oppressive as Psalm 38. To me it asks the question why the wicked seem to prosper; but I think it is meant to help us adjust our focus. Jesus put it this way:

19 Don’t store up treasures here on earth, where moths eat them and rust destroys them, and where thieves break in and steal. 20 Store your treasures in heaven, where moths and rust cannot destroy, and thieves do not break in and steal. 21 Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be.

Matthew 6:19-21 / New Living Translation

Jesus encourages us to chase after treasure that will last in heaven because where our treasure is; that is where our hearts are. The main idea of this morning’s text is this. LIFE IS TOO SHORT TO CHASE AFTER THINGS THAT HAVE NO VALUE IN ETERNITY. Instead of infinity, let me use a number we can all understand. If we are extremely lucky; we could live to be 100-years-old. So we will spend a hundred years living here on earth. But in heaven, we will live a million years. Really it’s eternity but that’s hard to wrap our minds around. So based on how we live our lives during this short 100 years will determine how we spend the next million years. The point of the Psalmist is that since life is so short in comparison to eternity; we ought to use every day to build up for ourselves more treasure in heaven. We forget how short life is.

There was a group of guys that used to play soccer ever week in a league. On the way home, one of the guys got hit by a car and died. One of his friends was especially distraught and when he went up to the casket he just quietly kept calling out his name. When he went to the bathroom, lo and behold, his dead friend appeared to him. He asked him how he was and what heaven was like. His friend described the streets of gold and the great accommodations. His friend asked, “Is there soccer in heaven?”

“In regards to your question I have good news and bad news. The good news is that we do have soccer in heaven. In fact we have leagues.”

“Well what’s the bad news?”

“You’re our starting goalie in tomorrow’s game.”

We rarely think about life in the context of death. But the psalmist wants us to because remembering that life is short helps puts life in perspective. In fact, we could die at any time.

I. TOO SHORT TO FOCUS ON WHAT OTHERS HAVE (VS 1-3)

In verses 1-3 David says that life is too short to focus on what others have. FOCUSING ON THE SUCCESS OF THE WICKED IS A WASTE OF TIME AND ENERGY. If there is any thought that we want to carry over from Psalm 38, it might be this. When God disciplines His children, it really is a
blessing because God is doing everything in His power to prevent us from spending an eternity in hell; eternally separated from Him. We can be sure that as a loving Father, whatever He sends our way is meant to get us back on track. I think that lack of focus or focusing on the wrong things confuse us and get us off our main goal as God’s children; to praise, worship, and serve God.

Focusing on the wicked as described in verse 1 and the first half of verse 2 confuses and frustrates us. Really the main thought here is silence. Silence in the Christian life can truly be golden when we sit and contemplate about our relationship with God. The words used here are terms that describe someone exercising self-discipline. The psalmist is serious about remaining silent. In the first and third lines of verse 1 he uses the word guard; shamar in Hebrew. The first line says, “I will guard my ways.” The third line reads, “I will guard my mouth as if muzzling it.”

Two of the spiritual disciplines I am trying to practice this year are silence and solitude. It is good to quite our minds and our mouths in order to wait for God to demonstrate His love and His will for us. We must wait with spiritually open eyes and ears, with soft and open hearts, and with a desire to obey.

So it seems as if the psalmist is practicing the spiritual discipline of silence. He will not speak a word; good or bad. It sounds really good at first; until we combine it with the second half of verse 2 and verse 3 where we see that he is being silent because he is seething over the wicked. In our world, it seems as if the wicked seem to prosper. The more wealth, power, and fame one has, the more they are able to get away with lawlessness. We have said this before in our study through the Psalms; but we need to remind ourselves frequently. The world under the control of Satan has come to value wealth, power, fame, and pleasure as the most precious things we can possess. Therefore it follows that people that belong to this world spend their lives chasing after these things. Many of them have become quite successful at obtaining great amounts of wealth, power, fame, and pleasure. We look at them and it appears that they control the world and we look like pawns to be used by them. And we have already said that the people of this world try to chase after these things, obtain them, hold on to them, and accumulate more and more.

When I overly focus on this I become angry at the injustice of it all and sometimes jealous of what they have. Look at the negative energy the psalmist expends over this. He has become angry, wounded, and depressed. Look at the second line in verse 3. Instead of meditating and contemplating on God; he starts to meditate on the prosperity and success of the wicked. In other words, he keeps playing it over and over and over again in his mind. The more he replays it and stews on it, the more confused, depressed, angry, and worked up over it he gets. You can see that he is trying to not let it out; but it is eating him up.

And then out of all this anger, he speaks. Do you see that in the last line of verse 3? He has been keeping this inside for a long time. He continues to replay it in his mind. When he can no longer hold it in, he explodes with words. This speech is certainly not holy. This speech itself is fueled from hell. We have continually said this. Jesus said it best:

45 Good people bring good things out of the good stored up in their heart, and evil people bring evil things out of the evil stored up in their heart. For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.

I want us to think about this for a moment. I have heard some of the most evil, judgmental, critical, and nasty things come out of people who call themselves Christians. We should all take time to review the words we speak each day. If we gossip about people, if we judge people, criticize people, and say nasty things about people or to people, then Jesus is saying that is what our hearts of full of. I have to admit that when I catch myself saying something out of anger or frustration; it hurts me to think this is not just coming out of my mouth; it is coming from my heart filled with anger and frustration.

This is starting to bother the poet. He realizes this can’t be good. How does this happen? We start to focus on the things the world values. We too start to chase after wealth, power, fame, and pleasure. We start to value them and resent God for not giving them to us. That’s not who the psalmist wants to be, it’s not who I want to be, and I’m pretty sure it’s not who all of you want to be. Instead, I think we desire to be people Jesus described as hearts so filled with His love and His goodness; that grace is what comes up out of our mouths. In order to do that, we need to focus on God, His Kingdom, and His values. We must keep in mind that we belong to this Kingdom and that God is our Father. FOCUSING ON THE SUCCESS OF THE WICKED IS A WASTE OF TIME AND ENERGY.

Did you ever see kids in school that were not very good at playing sports? It just seems as if they were missing the sports’ gene. That’s the way we should be in chasing after worldly things. Of course we will not be as successful as the world in chasing after wealth, power, money, and fame. Since we are born from above, we are missing the idolatry gene.

II. TOO SHORT TO WASTE TIME (VS 4-6)

And that brings us to the next point of the songwriter. Life is too short to waste time as he lays out in verses 4-6. SINCE LIFE IS SHORT, WE NEED TO EVALUATE WHAT WE ARE SPENDING OUR TIME ON. I think a worthwhile spiritual exercise would be to lay out our day planners, checkbooks, credit card statements, and DVRs. As we look over them, we can prayerfully evaluate how much time, energy, and money we devote to loving God and compare it to how much time, energy, and money we devote to chasing after the idols of wealth, power, fame, and pleasure. That would be a good self-examination for all of us.

In verses 4-5 we are reminded that life is really short. In order to get at how important this concept is to David, let me point out the word that connects this whole section together. In the third line of verse 5 and the second line of verse 6 we come across the Hebrew word hebel. It is translated a breath in verse 5 and vain in verse 6. Here is why the word is so emotional. In Genesis 4 we encounter the incident of Cain killing his brother Abel. Abel’s actual name is the word we are talking about here. Abel’s life was cut short by his brother Cain. It is the first recorded murder in history. Life is short and unpredictable.

Secondly, Adam and Eve could have also had this in mind when they named their second son Abel. They thought Cain might be the promised savior for them. But when they saw how screwed up he was turning out to be, they named their second son based on their disappointment with Cain. This word hebel also means vanity. In other words, it was meaningless to think Cain would now be their savior. And so they named their second son vanity or meaninglessness. It is the same word Solomon uses throughout the book of Ecclesiastes when he says:
Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.

Ecclesiastes 1:2 / ESV

Other versions translate the word vanity as meaninglessness. For Solomon, his conclusion is that chasing after wealth, power, fame, and pleasure, are all meaningless. Life chasing after these things is life chasing after the wind. So you can see how emotional and powerful this section is meant to be.

Let’s get back to verses 4-5. The dominating word here is yada which means to intimately know someone or something. The poet wants God to impress on his mind and his heart how short life really is. If we are enjoying life, we must remember that life will end shortly so we should give a great deal of thought as to what life after death will be like.

On the other hand, if we are suffering, we should take hope because that too will end shortly and we have an eternity to enjoy with God. It is imperative for us to understand that as the phenomenologists put it, “We are being towards death.” Unless we embrace that fact, we cannot truly live life to the full. Understanding how short life is brings perspective as to what is valuable; what is worth spending our time, energy, and money on.

One of the contemplations in the Ignatian exercises is to imagine and contemplate our own death. What will it be like for us to face death and die? What would we wish for? What would people say about us? Where will God be in all of this? Where will we go to spend eternity after death? That brings perspective to our present lives; whether we are enjoying them or in deep suffering.

Verse 6 states the obvious conclusion that life is too short to waste on things that don’t last. Most commentators don’t know what to do with the Selah here. You remember that Selah is an interlude. It can be emphasized with the crashing of a symbol or a call to be silent and contemplate. Here I think the Selah is meant to connect the thought that life is short and the call for us to examine how we should live based on that thought. In other words, Jesus told us that we should lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven. I don’t think I can improve on the way Jesus summarized this thought:

19 Don’t store up treasures here on earth, where moths eat them and rust destroys them, and where thieves break in and steal. 20 Store your treasures in heaven, where moths and rust cannot destroy, and thieves do not break in and steal. 21 Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be.

Matthew 6:19-21 / New Living Translation

Earthly treasures are easily identified as wealth, power, fame, and pleasure. Heavenly treasures are defined all through the Gospels. A good start would be to read, study, and Meditate on the Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew 5-7. Then spend a lot of time in the Gospels getting to know Jesus’ heart. He states pretty clearly what heavenly treasures are. Let me just list a few. He greatly values humility and love. These are often expressed by feeding the poor, clothing the naked, welcoming strangers, visiting the sick, etc. In short Jesus summed up heavenly treasure as those things that demonstrate our love for God, our love for one another, and our love for the lost. SINCE LIFE IS SHORT, WE NEED TO EVALUATE WHAT WE ARE SPENDING OUR TIME ON.
Let’s be honest. All of us have chased after the idols of this world. At one time or another we have chased after wealth, power, fame, and pleasure. It is easy to get seduced into chasing after these things. But when we catch ourselves and come back to our senses, we have to remember to just stop and repent. The Hebrew word for repent means to turn around. The word in Greek means to change our minds. We need to get our heads back in the game. That’s the thought that drives the next section.

III. TOO SHORT NOT TO CHANGE COURSE (VS 7-11)

In verses 7-11 David reminds himself and us that life is too short not to change course. WHEN WE REALIZE THAT WE HAVE BEEN CHASING AFTER THE WORTHLESS IDOLS OF THIS WORLD, WE NEED TO CHANGE COURSE AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE. Since chasing after the idols of this world are expensive and energy draining, we need to make a correction as soon as possible.

Verses 7-8 instruct us as to how to change course. First of all, as we said, repentance means changing our minds. In other words, we have to come to a point where we realize that chasing after the idols of this world leave us broke, emotionally drained, physically exhausted, still empty, and unsatisfied. We need to come to the point where we once again surrender to God and agree to live life as He has designed it. In doing so, we must acknowledge the worthlessness of chasing earthly things and the value of loving God and pursuing a relationship with Him.

But remember the Hebrew meaning of the word is to turn around. Repentance is not simply giving intellectual assent to the truth; it is taking action based on the truth. The Apostle Paul had achieved everything a man could want during his time. Listen to what he says about it:

7 I once thought these things were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done. 8 Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ.

Philippians 3:7-8 / New Living Translation

We all know that the Apostle Paul gave up all his position and wealth to travel the world preaching about Christ. He was jailed, tortured, persecuted, pursued, shipwrecked, and left for dead. He never complained because he had found that following Christ is the most valuable thing in this life. When I think about this, I’m kind of embarrassed at how little I have been required to give up for Christ.

But David reminds us of one of the motivations to change course in verses 9-11. If we are believers and continue to chase after the idols of this world, we can be sure that God will not idly stand by. God will certainly take action against us if we refuse to repent. God will not tolerate pride, worldly thinking, worldly attitudes, and worldly behaviors in His children. God’s plan is for us to get back on track. Suffering will come our way if we refuse to repent; but for believers, God is trying to get us to change. C. S. Lewis said this, “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts to us in our pain. It is His megaphone to arouse a deaf world.”

Believers ought to consider this type of suffering a blessing. Again in verse 11 we are drawn back to the words of Jesus concerning how earthly treasures can rust, decay, be eaten by moths or
stolen. God can take everything away in an instant. Is that what it will take for us to repent? Does God have to take everything away from us so that He is the only thing left? And to put an exclamation point on this, the psalmist uses that word hebel again. It is the word that means vanity and meaninglessness. Only this time he uses it twice in a row. Literally the last line reads, “Everyone is hebel hebel, Selah!”

First of all, life is short. When we chase after the things of this world, we reduce ourselves to meaningless vane creatures. How low is that? God may let unbelievers get away with chasing after the things of this world; but He will not let His children get away with it. Can you imagine what it would be like to have our lives and personhood described as vane and meaningless? That’s why this is so important. WHEN WE REALIZE THAT WE HAVE BEEN CHASING AFTER THE WORTHLESS IDOLS OF THIS WORLD, WE NEED TO CHANGE COURSE AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE.

At this time, I’d like to back and talk about the subtitle for this Psalm. The subtitle reads, “For the director of music. For Jeduthun. A psalm of David.” Jeduthun was one of the worship leaders appointed by David to lead public worship. It appears that this Psalm was meant to be sung in the context of corporate worship.

IV. TOO SHORT TO POSTPONE CHANGE (VS 12-13)

So after singing about the journey of David, the congregation is reminded in verses 12-13 that life is too short to postpone change. LIFE IS TOO SHORT TO REMAIN ALIENATED FROM GOD FOR EVEN A MINUTE.

Verse 12 describes a desperate prayer for help. You can hear a great deal of pain in the psalmist’s voice. He describes the state of being as living alienated from God. He describes himself as living in the Promised Land as a foreigner and a stranger; when actually it is the land of his birth.

Look, we are children of God and we are living in His Kingdom. When we start to reject the standards and values of His Kingdom to go chasing after the things of this world, we will feel alienated from God. Think about how hurtful that is. We are citizens of God’s Kingdom but because sin separates us from God and one another, we will feel as if we don’t even belong in the Kingdom. That’s all a lie but believable when we start to get confused by the devil. The songwriter cries out to God in tearful prayer.

Look at verse 13. It’s a prayer for restoration. God’s look and God’s gaze is meant to be a blessing. In fact in blessings we ask that God make His face to shine upon us and that He fix His gaze upon us in order to bless us with grace and peace. But when our attention and devotion are fixed on idols, God’s look and God’s gaze feel like condemnation. Being alienated from God is painful. We need to ask God to restore us so once again we can feel blessed in His gaze. All it takes is a prayer of confession and an act of repentance. LIFE IS TOO SHORT TO REMAIN ALIENATED FROM GOD FOR EVEN A MINUTE.

Aaron blessed Israel with this blessing:

“May the LORD bless you and keep you.
May the LORD make His face to shine upon you;
and be gracious unto you.
May the LORD fix His gaze upon you;
And give you peace.”

LIFE IS TOO SHORT TO CHASE AFTER THINGS THAT HAVE NO VALUE IN ETERNITY.