

Psalms 39:4

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

LORD, make me to know mine end, and the measure of my days, what it is; that I may know how frail I am.

Analysis

LORD, make me to know mine end, and the measure of my days, what it is; that I may know how frail I am. After resolving to silence (verses 1-3), David breaks his silence with a prayer focused on mortality. This isn't suicidal despair but mature reflection on human finitude. David asks God to teach him the brevity and fragility of life—not so he'll despair but so he'll live wisely with proper perspective.

'Make me to know' (hodi'eni, הוֹדִיעֵנִי) is imperative—David asks God to teach him something he cannot fully grasp on his own. Human nature tends toward denial of mortality; we live as though we'll live forever. David prays for divine instruction to counter this natural blindness. Only God can truly teach us the reality of our temporary existence and the wisdom to live accordingly.

'Mine end' (qitzi, קִצִּי) refers to the termination of life, while 'the measure of my days' (middat yamai, מִדַּת יָמַי) emphasizes life's quantifiable limitation. Unlike God who is eternal ('from everlasting to everlasting,' Psalm 90:2), human life is measurable, countable, finite. Psalm 90:12 echoes this prayer: 'So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.' Awareness of mortality produces wisdom, urgency, and proper priorities.

'That I may know how frail I am' (meh chadel ani, מִהַחֲדַל אֲנִי) literally means 'what ceasing I am' or 'how transient I am.' The word chadel (חָדַל) means ceasing, transient, frail, temporary. David prays to understand his own impermanence. This isn't morbid obsession with death but healthy realism that informs priorities. When

we grasp our brevity, we invest in eternity rather than temporary pursuits, we value relationships over possessions, we seek God's kingdom over earthly kingdoms.

Historical Context

Ancient Israel lived with mortality more immediately than modern Western societies. Infant mortality was high, diseases frequently fatal, warfare common, and life expectancy short by today's standards. Yet despite this proximity to death, humans still naturally avoid contemplating their own mortality. David's prayer represents counter-cultural wisdom—choosing to face what others deny.

Psalm 39 shares themes with Psalm 90, traditionally attributed to Moses. Psalm 90:3-6 reflects on human mortality: 'Thou turnest man to destruction... For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past... In the morning they are like grass which groweth up. In the morning it flourisheth, and groweth up; in the evening it is cut down, and withereth.' Both psalms contrast eternal God with temporary humanity, drawing the same conclusion: only divine wisdom can teach us to live well in light of our brevity.

Wisdom literature across the ancient Near East contemplated mortality. Egyptian literature like the 'Instruction of Ptahhotep' and Mesopotamian texts like the 'Epic of Gilgamesh' grappled with death's inevitability. But Hebrew wisdom was distinct: it connected mortality awareness not to fatalism or hedonism ('eat, drink, and be merry') but to covenant faithfulness and godly living. Awareness of our 'end' should drive us toward God, not away from Him.

Jesus taught this same wisdom: 'What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?' (Mark 8:36). James wrote, 'Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away' (James 4:14). Paul urged, 'Redeeming the time, because the days are evil' (Ephesians 5:16). Mortality awareness should produce urgency in evangelism, holiness, and kingdom investment.

Related Passages

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

Study Questions

1. How does awareness of your mortality affect your daily priorities and decisions?
2. In what ways do you live as though you'll live forever rather than recognizing your frailty?
3. What would it mean practically for God to 'teach you to number your days'?
4. How should understanding your temporary existence change your investment of time, money, and energy?
5. What legacy are you building in light of your mortality—temporary or eternal?

Interlinear Text

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|-----------------|--------|-----------|-----------------|------------|-------|-------|
| אֶדְעָה | יְהוָה | קֵץ י | וּמִדָּת | יָמַי | מֶה | הָיָא |
| make me to know | LORD | mine end | and the measure | of my days | H4100 | H1931 |
| H3045 | H3068 | H7093 | H4060 | H3117 | | |
| אֶדְעָה | מֶה | כִּדְלִי | אֲנִי | | | |
| make me to know | H4100 | how frail | H589 | | | |
| H3045 | | H2310 | | | | |

Additional Cross-References

Psalms 90:12 (Parallel theme): So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.

Psalms 103:14 (Parallel theme): For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust.

Psalms 119:84 (Parallel theme): How many are the days of thy servant? when wilt thou execute judgment on them that persecute me?

Job 14:13 (Parallel theme): O that thou wouldest hide me in the grave, that thou wouldest keep me secret, until thy wrath be past, that thou wouldest appoint me a set time, and remember me!

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