

Psalms 39:5

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Behold, thou hast made my days as an handbreadth; and mine age is as nothing before thee: verily every man at his best state is altogether vanity. Selah.

Analysis

Behold, thou hast made my days as an handbreadth; and mine age is as nothing before thee: verily every man at his best state is altogether vanity. Selah. This verse expands David's meditation on mortality, employing vivid metaphors to illustrate human life's brevity. The verse moves from personal (my days) to universal (every man), demonstrating that human frailty isn't David's unique problem but the human condition.

'As an handbreadth' (ketephachot, כֶּתֶפַח) compares life to the width of a palm—approximately four inches, the smallest unit of measurement in ancient Israel. David isn't complaining that God made his life short; he's acknowledging reality. Even a long life is brief when measured against eternity. Moses lived 120 years, yet Psalm 90:10 calls human lifespan 'threescore years and ten'—and even that extended life is 'soon cut off, and we fly away.'

'Mine age is as nothing before thee' (ve'cheldi ke'ayin negdecha, וְכֵלְדִי כְעַיִן נֶגְדֶּחָךְ) uses ayin (אֵין), meaning non-existence, nothingness. Before God's eternal existence, human lifespan rounds to zero. This isn't nihilism but perspective—recognizing the infinite chasm between Creator and creature, eternal and temporal, immortal and mortal. God inhabits eternity (Isaiah 57:15); we inhabit moments.

'Verily every man at his best state is altogether vanity' (ach kol hevel kol adam

nitzav, אָנֵצֵב כָּל־הָבָל כָּל־אֲדָם נֶאֱבָר) uses hevel (הֶבֶל), the keyword of Ecclesiastes, meaning vapor, breath, vanity—that which is temporary and insubstantial. Even 'at his best state' (nitzav, אָנֵצֵב, meaning standing firm, established, at peak), humans are vapor. At our strongest, wealthiest, most successful, we're still temporary and fragile. The verse shatters human pride and self-sufficiency.

'Selah' (סֶלָה) appears here, signaling a musical pause for meditation. The worshiper is invited to stop and contemplate this sobering truth before proceeding. This isn't depressing but liberating—recognizing our vanity frees us from illusions, pretensions, and misplaced confidence, driving us to find security in God alone.

Historical Context

The concept of human life as vapor or breath appears throughout ancient Near Eastern literature, but biblical usage is theologically distinct. In pagan thought, human insignificance led either to fatalism (we're meaningless so nothing matters) or to hedonism (we're brief so pursue pleasure). Biblical wisdom draws opposite conclusions: because we're brief, we must live purposefully; because we're vanity, we must anchor in God's eternal reality.

Ecclesiastes develops this hevel theme extensively. 'Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity' (Ecclesiastes 1:2). Yet Ecclesiastes doesn't end in despair but in worship: 'Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man' (Ecclesiastes 12:13). Recognizing life's vanity apart from God drives us toward God, where meaning, purpose, and permanence are found.

The 'handbreadth' measurement had practical uses in ancient construction and commerce, but here becomes metaphor for life's brevity. Just as a handbreadth is the smallest standardized measurement, human life is the smallest measurement against eternity's timeline. Yet Scripture paradoxically affirms both human insignificance (we're vapor) and human significance (God knows us, values us, redeems us). We're dust, yet God breathed life into that dust; we're temporary, yet offered eternal life.

Paul's theology echoes these themes: 'Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory' (2 Corinthians 4:17). Present sufferings are temporary, but coming glory is eternal. Human life is brief, but resurrection life is endless. This paradox—temporary now, eternal then—is Christianity's answer to nihilism. Yes, we're vapor, but God offers us substance in Christ.

Related Passages

1 John 4:8 — God is love

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Study Questions

1. How does viewing your life as a 'handbreadth' compared to eternity affect your perspective on current problems?
2. In what ways are you tempted to find security in your 'best state' rather than in God's eternal reality?
3. What does it mean that even at peak success, we're 'altogether vanity,' and how should this affect ambition?
4. How can awareness of human frailty drive you toward God rather than into despair?
5. What eternal investments are you making with your temporary 'handbreadth' of life?

Interlinear Text

הֵן ה	טֶפַח וְתַן	נָתַתָּה	יָמַי	וְקִלְדִּי	כָּאֵן
H2009	as an handbreadth	Behold thou hast made	my days	and mine age	H369
	H2947	H5414	H3117	H2465	
וְנִגְדִי	אֶרְאֶה	כָּל	הַבָּל	כָּל	אֶת־דָּמִי
H5048	H389	is altogether	vanity	is altogether	man
		H3605	H1892	H3605	H120
					נֶאֱבָר
					H5324
סֵלָה:					
Selah					
H5542					

Additional Cross-References

Psalms 144:4 (Parallel theme): Man is like to vanity: his days are as a shadow that passeth away.

Psalms 89:47 (Creation): Remember how short my time is: wherefore hast thou made all men in vain?

Psalms 62:9 (Parallel theme): Surely men of low degree are vanity, and men of high degree are a lie: to be laid in the balance, they are altogether lighter than vanity.

Ecclesiastes 2:11 (Parallel theme): Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun.

Psalms 39:11 (Parallel theme): When thou with rebukes dost correct man for iniquity, thou makest his beauty to consume away like a moth: surely every man is vanity. Selah.

James 4:14 (Parallel theme): 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.

