

Psalm 39:5 (Life Is Short) (Atonement)

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. Psalm 39:5

The Basic Bible Truth

Our lives here on the earth are nothing compared to the length of eternity. We are here but a moment, and yet the choices we make during this brief moment, will affect our eternity dramatically. God has supplied a way for us to be with Him forever. We have free will and a free choice. Choose wisely.

The Object

A Sharp, Pointed Stick
A Marshmallow
Some Hershey's Chocolate Syrup
A Small Plate



I have enough foreign language education to know that there are often words in one language that do not translate well into another. Translating Hebrew into English faces the same challenges. I am constantly amazed at how well they handled the very difficult moments—the idioms, the phrases, the words for which English has no parallel. This passage has two of them that are best defined with demonstration.

The Lesson

Psalm 39:5 is a unique verse in the Bible. I know of no other verse with this same characteristic. In the last half of the verse we find this phrase: *Verily, every man at his best state is altogether vanity. Selah.* You will notice the word *Verily*. It essentially means: “Hey, slow down for a minute. What follows is very important, and I don’t want you to miss any of it.” Then at the end is the word *Selah*. The best way to

define this word is to see it similar to a production note in a script. It is saying, “Stop right here and think for a minute about what you just read.” So the phrase starts with a recommendation to listen carefully to what follows and ends with a suggestion to think about what was just read. I find that fascinating, because I have not seen this anywhere else in Scripture. I would suggest to you that God is placing an emphasis on the phrase in between those two words.

In the original Hebrew, the phrase consists of just three words. Let’s look at those three words carefully. The first word has been translated as *every man*. It is actually also a proper name: Adam. Adam was the first man, and so his name came to mean just that: man. But it also should remind us that Adam sinned and because of that act, we all are faced with the challenges of sin in our lives as well. We don’t blame him for introducing sin into the world. The fact is, if he hadn’t, one of us surely would have. But we as human beings are all in the same boat together. We all sin and fall short of the perfection of God.

The second word has been translated *at his best state*. It is actually, a very good rendering of the word from Hebrew into English. But there are some concepts that a Hebrew might see in this specific word that the translators did not have room to explain in detail. For someone of that era of time, this word would bring to mind a common farming issue. Oxen were used as draft animals in this area, and were not led, but driven by the farmer as he walked beside or slightly behind the animal. His steering mechanism was a simple sharp pointed stick, an ox goad. With that stick, he could simply touch the flank of the animal and it would instinctively shy away from the sharp point and turn slightly. It remembered that the stick could be painful and learned to avoid that problem by simply changing direction. Poor farmers would use a wooden stick as their guiding tool. A wealthy farmer might have one made of iron. Iron in those days was of a poor grade, and not like our steel of today. The point of an ox goad could break quite easily and then would need to be sharpened again. The farmer would then go to a blacksmith and, using this very same word, ask the gentleman to repoint his ox goad, to put it back into its originally intended condition, one that he could use again. That is the meaning of the second word in the phrase in Psalm 39:5b.

So far then, we have, Every man, every person, who has descended from Adam faces the same challenge—managing their sin nature. We are all born with a sinful heart that is in need of restoration, that needs to be put back into its best state, being born again—we need salvation. Now for the last word. “*Is altogether vanity*” is actually one word in the Hebrew, and is also a proper name—Abel. Because of the rift between Cain and Abel and Abel’s early death, his name became synonymous with the idea of a short span of time.

If we read this passage, substituting our definitions, we get, “Every man, who has been put back into his originally intended condition, that of being born again, is like Abel.” I contend that is a fair reading of the verse. Let’s look at the only thing we actually know about Abel. He brought an offering and God “looked with favor upon”, or “had respect unto” Abel and his offering. That word in the Hebrew refers to atonement.

That phrase, “looked with favor upon” is a difficult one to translate in just a few words. The translators did a wonderful job given the parameters that they had to work under. But they couldn’t do a demonstration. Allow me to show you a giant roaster marshmallow. You will notice that it is not perfectly shaped. Looking at it from the end, you can see clearly it must have been smashed up against some other marshmallows, and it is not a perfect circle. It is not perfect. Looking at it from the side, you will notice that it is not a perfect cylinder. It is supposed to be a perfect cylinder. It is not perfect. You and I are not perfect. Even as Christians, we are not perfect. And God cannot look upon anything that is not perfect. That is a huge problem. Luckily, God has a solution—atonement.

As I place this marshmallow on a plate, let me introduce to you, the most amazing product on grocery shelves today—Hershey’s Chocolate Syrup. I love this stuff. Now watch closely. As I drizzle the syrup, covering every square millimeter of this marshmallow, I am “atoning” this marshmallow. When it is completely covered, do you still see the marshmallow? You see its shape, but not the marshmallow itself. What you are looking at is the syrup covering the marshmallow. One more thing. As I touch my finger to the chocolate covering and taste the wonderful chocolate, I can’t describe to you adequately how amazing this tastes. And you are no doubt envious of my position as taste tester. At this very moment, you are “looking with favor” upon this marshmallow. That is exactly what the word there means!

When God atones for our sin, He does it extra, extra spectacularly. The precious blood of Jesus covers our sins, and when God looks upon us as Christians, He sees the perfect, wonderful blood of Jesus covering our sins completely. So the next time you hear someone talk about atonement, remember our little marshmallow demonstration and how we covered it in wonderful chocolate syrup, and you’ll have a pretty good understanding of the word.

Abel was “covered” by his offering. Cain was not. The difference was blood. Abel’s offering required the shedding of blood and God has had a hard and fast rule from the very beginning that without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sin. Abel’s sin was covered, it was atoned for, by the blood of his sacrifice. Our atonement is in the person of Jesus and the blood that He shed on the cross for our sin.

Every man who has been restored to his originally intended condition is indeed like Abel, we are covered by the blood of Jesus.