

Psalm 49

To the chief Musician, A Psalm for the sons of Korah.

Psalm 49: This psalm reads almost like a passage from the Book of Proverbs, with its bold contrast between the destinies of wicked and righteous. It addresses an age-old question: the prosperity of the wicked. The psalmist lived in a day when many evil men were boasting of their wealth (verses 5-6). The psalm was therefore written to enable God's people to rise above the ungodly drive for riches. There is first an invitation to listen (verses 1-4): the poet calls on all men because the psalm has a universal application. Second, he demonstrates how woefully inadequate riches are (verses 5-12): on the day of one's death they cannot redeem (verses 6-7). Finally, the divergent destinies of the wicked and the righteous are vividly stated (verses 13-20): the wicked man has no hope beyond this life (verse 14), but the righteous man will be resurrected to eternal life (verse 15).

Verses 1-20: Psalm 49 deals with the most real thing about life – the certainty of death. One of its major lessons is that “you really can't take it with you”. Continuing these kinds of very practical lessons about life and death, it falls neatly into the category of a didactic or wisdom poem. In places, it sounds very much like portions of Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. It contains warnings to the rich and famous and words of comfort for the poor. These timeless Old Testament messages undergird many New Testament passages, such as the accounts about the rich fool in (Luke 12:13-21), or the rich man and Lazarus in (Luke 16). After a fairly lengthy introduction the body of the psalm falls into two parts as indicated by the climaxing refrain (in verses 12 and 20). The wisdom poet of Psalm 49 developed his somber theme in two stages, focusing one death as the universal experience of all men.

- I. Introduction (49:1-4).
- II. Stage One: The Common Experience of Death (49:5-12).
 - A. Applying His Teaching through an Important Reflection (49:5-6);
 - B. Explaining His Teaching through Important Reminders (49:7-12).
- III. Stage Two: The Contrasting Experience in Death (49:13-20).
 - A. The Assurance of This Contrasting Experience in Death (49:13-15);
 - B. The Application of This Contrasting Experience in Death (49:16-20).

Psalm 49:1 "Hear this, all [ye] people; give ear, all [ye] inhabitants of the world:"

That is, What I am about. To utter is worthy of universal attention. It pertains equally to all mankind. The psalmist; therefore, calls on all the nations to attend to what he is about to say (compare the notes at Isa. 1:2). The scope of his message is geographically universal.

"Give ear": Incline your ear; attend (compare the notes at Psalm 17:6; also Isa. 37:17; Isa. 55:3; Dan. 9:18; Prov. 2:2).

"All ye inhabitants of the world": All peoples, all the inhabitants of the world, are summoned to listen, for the theme is one of universal interest; it concerns all humanity. It is characteristic of the 'Wisdom' or religious philosophy of Israel to view the problems of life in their wider aspect. It treats of man as man, not of Israel as the chosen people. The first line recalls the opening words of Micah's prophecy (Micah 1:2), and the words of his older namesake (1 Kings 22:28).

Psalm 49:2 "Both low and high, rich and poor, together."

Or "both the sons of Adam and the sons of men". By the sons of "Adam" are meant the multitude of the people, as Ben Melech explains it. The common people, the meaner sort, the base things of this world. And such are they, generally speaking, who are called by grace under the Gospel dispensation. And by "the sons of men" are meant the princes, nobles, and great men of the earth.

"Rich and poor together": These are called upon to hearken to what is after said, that the one may not be elated with and trust in their riches. And that the other may not be dejected on account of their poverty. And seeing both must die, and meet together at the judgment day. And inasmuch as the Gospel is preached to one as to another; and for the most part the poor hear it, receive it, and are called by it.

God is not impressed by great riches or fame of a person. This message is not to one class of people; it is to all the people of the earth. When it says give ear, it means to listen carefully.

Verses 3-4: "Wisdom ... understanding ... parable ... dark saying": All these are wisdom terms (compare respectively, Prov. 1:20; 9:1; 14:1; 24:7; then Prov. 2:3; 3:13; 5:1; 14:29, 18:2; 19:8; next Prov. 1:6; Ezek. 17:2; and finally, Judges 14:12).

Psalm 49:3 "My mouth shall speak of wisdom; and the meditation of my heart [shall be] of understanding."

That is, I will utter sentiments that are wise, or that are of importance to all. Sentiments that will enable all to take a just view of the subject on which I speak. This indicates "confidence" in what he was about to utter, as being eminently deserving of attention.

"And the meditation of my heart shall be of understanding": What I reflect on, and what I give utterance to, in the matter under consideration. The idea is, that he had meditated on the subject, as to what was real wisdom in the matter. And that he would now give utterance to the result of his meditations. It was not wisdom in general, or intelligence or understanding as such on which he designed to express the results of his thoughts. But it was only in respect to the proper value to be attached to wealth, and as to the fact of its causing fear (Psalm 49:5). In those who were not possessed of it, and who might be subjected to the oppressive acts of those who were rich.

The penman here is not bragging on himself, he is saying that the thoughts of his heart will be spoken by his mouth. We have discussed before that wisdom is a gift of God. Then he is saying

that the Spirit of God is speaking through him. Jesus promised all who believe to be taught of the Holy Spirit of God. This Spirit dwells within.

Psalm 49:4 "I will incline mine ear to a parable: I will open my dark saying upon the harp."

The "dark saying" takes the form of a perplexing question in this psalm: Why does God allow the rich to oppress the poor? This question is similar to the problems addressed in the Books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.

Here again, we have discussed that the entire Bible is really a parable. Just as Jesus took the disciples of old aside and taught them the meaning of the parables, the Holy Spirit reveals to believers the meaning of the parables. The penman here is saying that he sang the secrets of the parable.

Psalm 49:5 "Wherefore should I fear in the days of evil, [when] the iniquity of my heels shall compass me about?"

Or, of the evil man. When evil or evil men seem to have the upper hand, uncontrolled by any divine law of righteousness (compare Psalm 94:13).

"When the iniquity of my heels shall compass me about": The sense is also agreeable to the main scope of the Psalm, which is to comfort good men against that great trial and stumbling-block. The prosperity of the wicked, and the oppressions and afflictions of the righteous. Bishop Hare translates the verse, "Wherefore should I fear in the days of adversity, when the iniquity of those that lie in wait for me surrounds me?" "The iniquity of my heels": This indicates evil chasing him.

This seems to me that there are habits that some people have that bother them, even after they are saved. The enemy knows very well what our weaknesses are, and that is what he chases us with. An overweight person would be offered all types of delicate food that they thought they had stopped desiring. A person who had just stopped smoking would be constantly in the presence of someone blowing smoke in their face.

Psalm 49:6 "They that trust in their wealth, and boast themselves in the multitude of their riches;"

"They that trust in their wealth": Mankind's propensity to trust in his own material goods is well attested in Scripture (e.g., Psalm 52:7; Jer. 17:5). Biblically this is exposed as the epitome of stupidity (compare e.g., Prov. 23:4-5; Luke 12:16).

Notice what this really says. It is not those that are wealthy, but those who trust in their wealth. To trust in your wealth would mean that you had put it ahead of God. Riches are soon past. To boast of riches would be a quick way to lose them. A person is wealthy, because God has given the wealth to you. There is then, no reasonable reason to boast of wealth.

Verses 7-9: None of them can”: No person, regardless of his means, is able to escape death; it is inevitable (Heb. 9:27). This passage anticipates the second death of hell (compare Rev. 20:11-15), except for those who by faith have repented of their sin and embraced the only adequate ransom, the one paid by the Lord Jesus Christ with His death on the cross (compare Matt. 20:28; 1 Peter 1:18-19).

Psalm 49:7 "None [of them] can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him:"

Brother is here used in the wide sense of (Lev. 19:17; Gen. 13:11), where rendered “the one”. The sense is the same whether we make it nominative or accusative. Death is the debt which we all owe, and which each must pay the debt for himself. No wealth can buy a man off. God, in whose hand are the issues of life and death, is not to be bribed. Nor as the next verse says, even if the arrangement were possible, would any wealth be sufficient.

"Nor give to God a ransom for him": A ransom to redeem from sin, and so from the curse of the law and eternal death, must be given to God, against whom sin is committed. The lawgiver that is able to save and destroy; whose law is transgressed by it, and must be fulfilled. And whose justice is affronted and injured, and must be satisfied. And who is the creditor to whom men are debtors, and therefore the payment must be made to him.

Just as Simon the sorcerer found out, the things of God are not for sale. You cannot buy your way into heaven. The spotless blood of the Lamb of God is the only thing that can ransom any of us from death. The things of God are a free gift. They are not bought or sold.

Psalm 49:8 "(For the redemption of their soul [is] precious, and it ceaseth for ever:)"

Of their soul, or of their life, as soul is commonly used.

"Is precious": I.e. rare, as the word is used (1 Sam. 3:1 Dan. 2:11). Hard to be obtained. But he doth not call it simply impossible, because Christ hath purchased this privilege for his true disciples. That in some sense they shall not see death (John 8:51).

"It ceaseth for ever": I.e. it is never to be accomplished. To wit, by any mere man, for himself or for his brother.

The body of the first born son of the Hebrew was redeemed with a shekel of silver. This was just to excuse him from work in the sanctuary, not to save his soul. It is the precious spotless blood of the Lamb of God that purchases our soul.

Verses 9b-10a: not see corruption ... for he seeth": The irony is obvious; the wealthy person somehow hopes to get around death, yet he witnesses people constantly dying all around him, from the wise to the foolish.

Psalm 49:9 "That he should still live for ever, [and] not see corruption."

Or "though he should live", etc. Though the rich man should live ever so long, a thousand years twice told, as in (Eccl. 6:6). Yet he could not in all this time, with all his riches, redeem his brother. And at last must die himself, and so must his brother too, as his own experience and observation may assure him (Psalm 49:10). Or the meaning is, he cannot so redeem his brother, or give to God a ransom for him, that he should live a corporeal life for ever, and never die. Since all men die, wise men and fools, rich and poor; and much less that he should live and enjoy an "eternal life". As the Targum; a life of happiness and bliss hereafter, which is not to be obtained by gold and silver, but is the pure gift of God.

"And not see corruption": The grave, the pit of corruption, the house appointed for all living. Or "the judgment of hell", according to the Chaldee paraphrase.

There is no money great enough to cause him to live forever.

1 Peter 1:18-19 "Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, [as] silver and gold, from your vain conversation [received] by tradition from your fathers;" "But with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot:"

Psalm 49:10 "For he seeth [that] wise men die, likewise the fool and the brutish person perish, and leave their wealth to others."

The rich man must see that any hope of ransoming himself by means of his wealth, and so escaping death and the grave, is vain. Since the law of mortality, which is in operation all around him, is universal. No one is redeemed from death, in the sense of escaping "the first death." Not only does "the fool and the brutish person" perish, but the fate of "the wise" is the same. All die; all quit the earth; all leave behind them everything that they possessed on earth. No one can take with him the gold in which he has trusted (verse 6).

"And leave their wealth to others": They cannot carry it with them, so that it will be of no service to them after death. If the Judge could be bribed by gold, which he cannot, they will not have it with them to do it. They came into the world naked, and so they will go out, and carry nothing with them, but leave all behind them. Either to their babes, their children, or heirs (Psalm 17:14). Or to strangers, they do not know. And if they do, they do not know whether they will be wise men or fools, or what use they will make of it (Psalm 39:6; Eccl. 2:18).

The flesh of all men die. They are made from the dust of the earth, and to dust their body returns. When you die to this world, you cannot take anything with you. The great wealth that you have accumulated is passed on to your next of kin to spend as they see fit.

Psalm 49:11 "Their inward thought [is, that] their houses [shall continue] for ever, [and] their dwelling places to all generations; they call [their] lands after their own names."

Which they are ashamed to express, but which is yet their secret hope.

"Is, that their houses": Either their families, or rather their mansion-houses, as it is explained in the next clause.

"Shall continue for ever": To them and theirs in succeeding generations. They imagine, and secretly please themselves in this fancy. That when they can stay no longer in the world, their goodly houses which they have built shall stand for ever. And the places of their abode continue in their family from age to age.

"And their dwelling places to all generations": Which signify the same as before.

"They call their lands after their own names": As Egypt was called Mizraim, Ethiopia was called Cush, and Palestine was called Canaan. From men who were the first possessors of them (Gen. 10:6). Or "they proclaim their names throughout the land"; they seek to get a name, and spread and continue it in all parts of the world. Being unconcerned about their names being written in heaven, or about having a house not made with hands eternal there.

This describes a man who believes he will live in the flesh forever. He names buildings and all his property after himself, as if that will help him last forever. All of this is vanity. One of the worst false religions going around is the religion of self. Secular humanism is one name it is called. Since Eve in the garden, worldly people have wanted to be as God. The truth is we will never be as God. We are His servants. At the best, we are His adopted children, but we are never equal with God.

Psalm 49:12 "Nevertheless man [being] in honor abideth not: he is like the beasts [that] perish."

"Man ... that perish": This refrain (compare verse 20), is the main point of the psalm. Compare this concept in (Eccl. 3:19). While man and beast both die, man's spirit lives on eternally but beasts have no life after death.

The flesh of man is not made for eternity. You may be the president of the United States, but the day will come when the flesh will die.

Psalms 90:10 "The days of our years [are] threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength [they be] fourscore years, yet [is] their strength labor and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away."

The only way we are like the beast is that we do not determine our life span, God does. We live and die at the command of God.

Psalm 49:13 "This their way [is] their folly: yet their posterity approve their sayings. Selah."

This their last end becoming like the beasts that perish, which is the issue and event of all their confidence, ambition, and honor, that shows the folly of their lives and conduct. Or this their course of life, in trusting to their riches; boasting of their wealth; and pleasing themselves with the thoughts of the continuance of their houses and dwelling places to all generations. And calling their lands after their own names; all proclaim their folly. Or, as some render the words, "this their way is their hope" or "confidence". They place all their hope and confidence in their riches and honor, which is but a vain hope and a foolish confidence.

"Yet their posterity approve their sayings": They are of the same sentiments with their fathers; they say the same things, and do the same actions. Tread in their steps, and follow the same track. Though there have been such innumerable instances of the vanity and inconstancy of all worldly riches and grandeur.

We see in this, like father like son. The son comes right along behind the father and makes the same mistakes. They both die in their folly. Selah means think on these things.

Psalm 49:14 "Like sheep they are laid in the grave; death shall feed on them; and the upright shall have dominion over them in the morning; and their beauty shall consume in the grave from their dwelling."

Like sheep they are laid in the grave; death shall feed on them": More irony; they are considered as sheep once noted for their grazing; now death shall graze on them.

"The upright, dominion over them in the morning": This harbinger of good news to come (compare verse 15), interrupts this long series of confirmations of the condemnation of the self-reliant.

Sheep are animals who have no awareness of death, until it comes. These men in this verse, are like that. They make no preparation for the life after death. Their fate in the grave is the decay of their body. The believers on the other hand, are promised that they will reign with Jesus as kings and rulers over the unsaved.

Psalm 49:15 "But God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave: for he shall receive me. Selah."

"But God will redeem my soul ... he shall receive me": This is one of the greatest affirmations of confidence in God in the Psalms. Although the faithless person cannot buy his way out of death (verse 7), the faithful one is redeemed by the only Redeemer, God Himself. On the significance of the word "receive", compare (Gen. 5:24; 2 Kings 2:10; Psalm 73:24; Heb. 11:5). So (in verse 15), the psalmist expresses his confidence in God, that He would raise him to eternal life.

Believers in Christ have the promise of the resurrection. Because Jesus lives, His followers will also live. Believers in Christ are the redeemed. Selah means pause and think on these things.

Psalm 49:16 "Be not thou afraid when one is made rich, when the glory of his house is increased;"

"Be not thou afraid when one is made rich": (see verses 5-6). There is no ground for fear, nor even for perplexity, when the wicked grow rich and prosper. Their wealth will not ransom their souls (verses 7-9). They cannot take it with them to another world (verse 17). They will have no advantage from it there. On the contrary, their misery in another world will be such as to far outweigh any enjoyment which they may have had on earth (verses 14, 19).

"When the glory of his house is increased": Either the same with riches, so called (Gen. 31:1). Because men are apt to glory in them, and for the most part obtain honor and glory from men by them. Or children, and an increase of them, and especially when they come to honor. As also the advancement of themselves to high places of honor and trust. As well as additional buildings, large stately edifices, to make them look great, and perpetuate their names.

Psalm 49:17 "For when he dieth he shall carry nothing away: his glory shall not descend after him."

"He shall carry nothing away": An explicit you-can't-take-it-with-you attestation (compare Job 1:21; Eccl. 5:15; 1 Tim. 6:6-7).

Wealth and power do not follow to the grave. You came into this world with nothing, and you will go out of this world the same way. The riches of the world-oriented individual are just for a little while, and then quickly it is gone.

Psalm 49:18 "Though while he lived he blessed his soul: and [men] will praise thee, when thou doest well to thyself."

Praised and extolled himself on account of his acquisitions and merit. Or proclaimed himself a happy man, because of his wealth and riches. Or foolishly flattered himself with peace, prosperity, and length of days, and even with honor and glory after death.

"And men will praise thee, when thou doest well to thyself": Or "but men will praise thee", etc. Both rich and poor, all wise men. When, as the Jewish interpreters generally explain the word, a man regards true wisdom and religion, and is concerned for the welfare of his soul more than that of his body. Or "when thou thyself doest well": that is, to others, doing acts of beneficence, communicating to the necessities of the poor. Or rather, "when thou doest well to thyself", by enjoying the good things of life, taking his portion, eating the fruit of his labor, which is good and comely (see Eccl. 5:18).

Psalm 49:19 "He shall go to the generation of his fathers; they shall never see light."

Be gathered to them at death; or "to the dwelling place of his fathers". Either the grave, or hell, or both. The habitation of his wicked ancestors. Unless the words be rendered, as they are by some, though "he shall come to the age of his fathers"; live as long as they have done. Yet he must die at last, and leave all behind, as they have done.

"They shall never see light": Neither he nor his fathers; they shall never see light of the sun any more. Nor return to the light of the living, but shall lie in the dark and silent grave until the resurrection. Or rather, they shall never enjoy eternal light, glory, and happiness. The ultimate state of glory is sometimes expressed by "light" (John 8:12). This the people of God, such who are made light in the Lord, and are the children of the day, shall see. But wicked men shall not. They will be cast into outer darkness, where there is weeping, wailing, and gnashing of teeth.

The rich and powerful seem to have many friends in this world, but most of them are fair weather friends. They are friends who try to get something the rich possess. The sad thing here is, that he does not go to heaven. In heaven, there is Light all the time. He goes where there is no light.

Psalm 49:20 "Man [that is] in honor, and understandeth not, is like the beasts [that] perish."

A wicked man, as the Targum (see notes on Psalm 49:12).

"And understandeth not": From whence his riches and honor come, and what use he should make of them, and for what end he has them. He condemns man's ingratitude, who having received excellent gifts from God, abuses them like a beast to his own condemnation. Or that understandeth not spiritual things, which relate to the salvation of his soul. Who does not know God in Christ, nor the way of salvation by Christ. Nor has any experience of the work of the Spirit of God upon his soul. Nor has any spiritual understanding of the doctrines of the Gospel. Nor knows himself, his state and condition, and what true happiness is.

"Is like the beasts that perish": (see notes on Psalm 49:12).

Beasts do not have the power to choose heaven and hell. They are not made in the image of God. The beasts never prepare for eternal life in heaven. The man that the world honors here, that does not understand and prepare for life eternal is like the beast. He has no eternal life waiting for him.

Psalm 49 Questions

1. In verse 1 and 2 of this lesson, who were to listen?
2. Is God impressed with riches and fame?
3. What is meant by "give ear"?
4. Wisdom is a gift from _____.
5. What is he really saying in verse 3?
6. I will incline mine ear to a _____.

7. Who reveals to the Christian what parables mean?
8. What did the penman here, sing?
9. What are the iniquities of my heel?
10. Give 2 examples of iniquities of the heel.
11. Verse 6 is not speaking of wealthy people, but what?
12. Why is one person wealthy and another poor?
13. Who found out that the things of God could not be bought?
14. What is the only thing that can ransom any of us from death?
15. The body of the first born son of the Hebrews were redeemed with what?
16. What was this redemption from?
17. What happens to the wealth of the man when he dies?
18. Why does the man in verse 11 call the lands after his own name?
19. Since Eve in the garden, worldly people have wanted to be ____ _____.
20. What is the teaching of secular humanism?
21. In what way is man like the beast?
22. What is verse 13 of this lesson really saying?
23. Sheep have no _____ of death, until it comes.
24. In what way is worldly man like the sheep?
25. What promise do believers in Christ have?
26. Selah, in verse 15, probably means what?
27. You come into this world with _____, and you will go out with _____.
28. Who seem to have many friends in the earth?
29. Why will they not see Light?
30. In verse 20, what causes the man to be like the beast?