

A Message for Everyone: New Year 2023

Psalm 49

Psalm 49 is a psalm that deals in death, not for the sake of death, but for the sake of the wisdom and understanding death teaches. It ends the first series of Korahite psalms in the Psalter (42-49),ⁱ with a wisdom psalm.ⁱⁱ It reads like a passage from Job, Proverbs, or Ecclesiastes: *For he sees that even the wise die; the fool and the stupid alike must perish and leave their wealth to others* (10). The psalm answers the contradiction of the apparent prosperity of the wicked and the oppression of the faithful and offers the solution that there is life beyond the grave for those whom God redeems.ⁱⁱⁱ It will take another world to settle the issues of this world. The psalm warns against relying on wealth as a sign of God's approval and encourages the righteous to faithfully persevere.

In the modern world, we spend our lives avoiding death. We have the uncanny ability to pretend that our lives will go on forever. We cannot imagine a world that does not have us in it, so we create a story that has us as the main character in it.^{iv} The story of our lives is not about us, however, it is about the God who made you to whom you will give an account of your life.

When is the last time you thought of the fact that you will die? Not to consider the day of our death is grave error.

In the Medieval Christian world of the 15th century, one of the most popular literary works was *Ars Moriendi, The Art of Dying*. Through these writings the Church taught its members to prepare for death and to minister to the dying.

As the *Ars Moriendi* of the Medieval church came in the Protestant tradition it was set within the *art of living*.^v Perhaps this shift was a needed correction. The idea was the best preparation for dying is to remember death and live in light of it. Another shift has occurred in the modern Christian world. We avoid the topic altogether and pretend like death doesn't happen.

Psalm 49 urges us to prepare for death. This psalm teaches that death is coming for every man and calls us to live in light of it.

The psalm has three sections: an introduction that promises insight into a *riddle* (1-4), a stanza addressing the futility of relying on wealth (5-12), and a stanza describing the end of those who foolishly trust in wealth (13-20). Both stanzas

conclude with similar, proverb like refrains (12, 20) that move the argument of the psalm from wealth as no cure for death to understanding as superior to wealth.^{vi}

1. Consider the passing nature of your life (49:1-4)

The psalmist calls on all peoples to *hear* and *give ear* (1). Such a universal call to mankind links the psalm themes in this series of Korahite psalms (eg. 47:1, 8-9). Also, the theme of *death* links with the close of 48:14—*He will guide us forever* is the idea of, *He will guide us beyond death*. *Forever* in 48:14 is the same word in 49:10 translated *die*.

In case someone in the world thinks he is exempt from the psalmist's call to hear, he excludes exceptions by addressing *both low and high, rich and poor together* (2). Is the psalmist simply repeating and extending his meaning by following *low and high* with the reverse *rich and poor*? *Low* is literally sons of humans (*bene adam*), and *high* is literally sons of man (*bene ish*).^{vii} The meaning could be all men universally and each one individually whether rich or poor. The variation in address stresses that all must listen. At any rate, the message of the psalm applies to everyone in the world. It is a message everyone needs to hear, both the believer and the unbeliever.^{viii}

The psalmist uses a rare word for *world* (*heled*) that focuses on the passing nature of human life. Life is temporary. It is brief. We have to make sense of it. The transitional nature of life is a wakeup call to get our attention. The word not only addresses the fleeting nature of *time* but, also, the passing nature of the *times*. The message of the psalm is to all people in all times regardless of the popular notions of the day. Death is sure in whatever age and cultural moment.

The world needs to hear the psalmist's message of wisdom and understanding (3). The teaching purpose of the psalm solves the riddle of life with the reality that death marks the reversal of all injustice (4).

For the believer, considering the day of our death helps us live better, more focused and faithful lives.

This universal call also calls on the unbeliever to consider death. If you are an unbeliever, if you have not professed faith in Christ, have you considered that you, my friend, someday will die? You were made for so much more than simply living a brief life—pursuing a career, talking on the phone, creating a social media persona, playing games, eating fast food, and hanging with friends—and disappearing in death.^{ix}

The psalmist is confronting us with the temporary nature of our life and times.

2. Consider the irrationality of fear and the futility of trusting in riches in light of the reality of death (49:5-12).

The psalmist begins this stanza with a rhetorical question: *Why should I fear times of trouble* (ra' evil)? The point is he should not fear when it seems that the moral order is overturned by the prosperity of the wicked. He identifies those who would sinfully *cheat* (aqeb, heel) him as *those who trust in their wealth and boast in their riches* (6). The word *cheat* is used in Genesis 3:15 of the enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. The seed of the serpent would bruise his *heel*. There is something about the righteous that the wicked find morally objectionable. The psalmist asks, *Why should I fear when the wicked try to trip me up?* There is no need to fear when the seed of the serpent strikes at the heels of the righteous.

The psalmist shows the flaw in the point of view of those who *trust in wealth and boast in riches* (6). For all that wealth can do, it will not suffice as the *ransom*^x to God for one's life, so that he can *live on forever* and escape the grave (7, 9). Verse 8 is parenthetical, the ransom for one's life is costly. Jesus said it well, *For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul?* (Mk. 8:36-37). The psalmist says, the price is high, no one can pay it (8).

In an interview, published in the New York Times, Michael Bloomberg quipped that his liberal philanthropy - including his latest plan to drop \$50million battling the NRA on gun control - should guarantee him a seat in the afterlife.

Bloomberg said: 'I am telling you if there is a God, when I get to heaven I'm not stopping to be interviewed. I am heading straight in. I have earned my place in heaven. It's not even close.'^{xi} Apparently, Mayor Bloomberg has decided the price of a soul is about \$50 million.

Those who think, somehow, they can buy their way out of death need but recognize all men die (10). The wise die. The fool and stupid die too. The wealthy can see this is the case. And when they die, they leave all of it to others. In an effort to gain immortality, they named lands after themselves, but in the end, they occupy only their graves (11).

This stanza comes down to the proverbial refrain of verse 12: *Man in in his pomp will not remain; he is like the beasts that perish*. Man is like a beast in this regard,

he dies. Man was made for so much more than to die like a beast. A helpful reading of verse 12 is: *No better than the beast that perish is the man who has everything except a final lodging.*^{xiii} Man in all his honor and splendor cannot remain (lun, to lodge the night). Our houses are like hotels. There is no permanent dwelling in this age.

Who are the wealthy of the world who trust and boast in riches? Some people are objectively wealthy. Others are comparatively wealthy. The psalmist himself was in the priestly tribe. He was probably not hurting financially. There were to be no poor among the people of God (Deut 15:4), but the psalmist saw some who trusted in their wealth as a sign of righteousness regardless of how they obtained it, or what they did with it.

Perhaps, we think of the wealthy solely as the Bloombergs of the world. We break out all AOC on the billionaires as if there is something wrong with being wealthy. It just might be that we are wealthy who trust in riches. You don't have to be objectively wealthy to trust in riches; you just have to be greedy, envious, and covetous. Perhaps you've thought, *I just want enough money, so I don't have to worry.* How much is that? We could budget and live within our means with thanksgiving.

55% of the global population earns \$10K or less. I lived in the poorest country in Europe for a number of years. It is easy to return home and be critical of the wealth and ease of life here, especially the wealth of the church. But I soon got used to hot water and \$6 coffees. The critical attitude came from a bad place in me. The reality is there are as many problems related to wealth in the 3rd world as there are in the 1st world. If money would solve the world's problems here and there, they would already be fixed. The problem in the world is not poverty or wealth, it is not trusting in God through the Lord Jesus Christ.

I don't know of any way as a believer, whether rich or poor, to be rightly related to wealth other than to freely give. I don't know of any other way not to trust in riches.

3. Consider the irrationality of fear in light of the economy of eternity (49:13-20).

In this last section, the contrast is with the end of the wicked and the end of the righteous. The psalmist described the *path of those who have foolish confidence in themselves* (13, cf. 10 *foolhardy*). All along wealth has not been the problem but an

example. Wealth is not the only thing that brings unfounded self-confidence. The problem is an attitude of self-reliance that refuses to acknowledge dependence on God. Perhaps it's good looks, athletic ability, or academic achievement. The list is endless concerning the ways humans congratulate themselves and find a posse to help them. *I'll let you have some of my "cool" if you will be in my fan club.* The problem is unfounded confidence about their future and a cheering squad that eggs them on in their boasting (13b).

The irony is, all the while they are being shepherded by death. Here Death is personified. Their experience is the opposite of being shepherded through the valley of the shadow of death by the LORD (cf. Ps. 23:4). Death rounds them up and consumes them (14a,c).

The *morning* (14b) is the moment God acts for his people. It signifies the dawn of a new age in which the upright rule. Suddenly, there is a reversal of fortunes. The economy is measured differently. The righteous rule in the Kingdom.

The contrast continues in verse 15. How is it that the upright come to rule? Death ends the tyranny and injustice of the wicked and the suffering of the upright. Unlike the wicked shepherded by death, God *ransoms* the soul of the righteous from the power of death and *receives* them (15). Jesus is the Great Shepherd of the sheep (Heb 13:20). The Lamb is the shepherd of the upright, *and he will guide them to springs of living water* (Rev. 7:17).

No man can pay a ransom for his own soul, the price is too high (7-8). But God has ransomed our souls through the offering of his own Son: *The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many* (Mk. 10:45).

The word *receive* (laqach) is the same word translated *took* in Genesis 5:24 when *Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him*, and of the translation of Elijah (2 Kgs. 2:3,5,9,10). God redeems his people and takes them to himself. This verse comes to its full meaning in the gospel. Jesus died and rose again, and he will raise all those who have faith in him. That final day resolved every injustice and all the suffering the people of God have experienced through the ages.

As I worked through this text, I received news that a friend had died. He was 55. I went to college with him. Kevin was faithful to the end. He preached last Sunday and went home and died. In the early 1980s, he sat in my living room and asked, *What do you think about election?* That question set the stage for the rest of my life

and his. He was a faithful preacher of the Word of God and a scholar. He never married, he never pastored, and he lived his whole life in a small Mississippi community. From there, he launched Prayer Closet Ministries and impacted people across the world. He spent his life praying for revival, engaging in evangelism and spiritual warfare, and promoting the healing of believers in all aspects of their being. What can we say about Dr. Meador's life? He was faithful to the end. A prophet and an evangelist and a teacher lived among us and prayed for us. God has vindicated his life and ministry. God has redeemed his soul from the power of Sheol and received him into glory (15).

For this reason, the people of God have no need to fear when the wicked prosper, when they think prosperity is God's approval of them (16). What happens when they die and carry nothing with them (17)? How will they then argue God's approval of their lives (18)? The basis of their reference is gone and gone will be all opportunity to know God (19).

Man in all his honor and splendor lacking understanding perishes like the beasts (20). We could read it like this: *No better that the beasts that perish is the man who has everything except spiritual understanding.*^{xiii}

The riddle is solved. The Proverb revealed. Riches have no staying power and cannot help one avoid death (12). Self-reliance is the fatal error of those who trust in themselves and not God (20).

The psalmist offers wisdom and understanding as he solves the riddle of human existence, all men die. God ransoms His own from the power of death.

ⁱ See Psalms 84-85 and 87-89 for the further Korahite psalms.

ⁱⁱ Other wisdom psalms include Psalms 1,19,32,34,37,73,112,119, and 128; See Futato, *Interpreting the Psalms*, 171-173. Scholars are by no means agreed on the number of wisdom psalms. You can hear the echo of wisdom in many psalms.

ⁱⁱⁱ Harman, *Psalms*, Mentor Commentary, 383.

^{iv} Matthew McCullough, *Remember Death*, 28.

^v <http://www.deathreference.com/A-Bi/Ars-Moriendi.html>

^{vi} Wilson, 746-747.

^{vii} Goldingay, *Psalms*, BCOT, 99.

^{viii} Ross, *The Psalms*, vol 2, 139-140.

^{ix} By divine revelation the psalmist has received a proverb and will give the answer in a song (4). Verses 12 and 20 may be the message of psalm reduced to a short pithy statement. The riddle is not a brainteaser but the difficult topic of the prosperity of the wicked while the righteous suffer oppression and injustice. The psalmist calls on us to live faithfully not fearing the powerful because the reality of death marks the reversal of all injustice.

^x Ransom (pada) is redeem, rescue another. Price (koper) is cover, redemption price, ransom, sum of money, price of a life. Pada and koper are in the family of terms that describe rich concept of redemption in the Scripture. The context here shows both terms carry the idea of paying a price to redeem. Pada occurs again in verse 15.

^{xi} <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2605965/Michael-Bloomberg-Im-going-straight-heaven-not-close.html>.

^{xii} Wilcock, *The Message of Psalms 1-72*, BST, 178.

^{xiii} Wilcock, 178.