

## Are You Prepared to Die?

Psalm 49

Studies in the Psalms #50

**W**HAT'S the big thing you notice that's *left out* of this Psalm? Psalm 49 never mentions the great truths of the LORD's redemptive plan. We don't read that "father Abraham had many sons, many sons had father Abraham." There's no Charlton Heston-esque exodus moment here. There's nothing about king David.

Psalm 49 meditates on one of the great universal questions of life that philosophers and average people in all societies of all statues have struggled with: why do the wicked prosper more than the righteous in this life? How does this meditation solve this dilemma? There's a universal reality all human being are going to experience that levels the playing field: death. We're all going to die. Hebrews 9:27 says, "it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment." This is reflected in our liturgical tradition in the *Book of Common Prayer* in a prayer that goes like this: "In all time of our tribulation; in all time of our prosperity; in the hour of death, and in the day our judgment, Good Lord, deliver us."

The question for us, then, is "are you prepared to die?" I don't merely mean do you have a will or a living trust or life insurance. You're being prepared to die is reflected in where you place your hope now as a righteous

person struggling to see the wicked so blissfully ignorant and prosperous?

Don't place your hope in wealth—if you're rich, not in the wealth you have; if you're poor, not in the wealth you wish you had. Put your hope in God who alone can redeem from death.

LISTEN UP! (vv. 1–4)

This meditation opens with a call to LISTEN UP! **Hear this, all peoples!**

*'ammim* (v. 1a) These are the same people the Lord conquered and invited to praise him in 47:1. Note that this call is not addressed to the covenant people alone, but to everyone. The second line says this too: **Give ear, all inhabitants of the world of time** (v. 1b). The sense is the finiteness of this life.<sup>1</sup> Who are **all peoples** and **all inhabitants**? The **low and high**, which is a sociological idea, and the **rich and poor**, which is an economic idea. Everyone needs to listen.

Why? Look at the accumulation of terms the Psalm uses in verses 3–4: **wisdom, meditation, understanding, proverb, and riddle**. This is an important subject we need help with. The Psalmist is a man who in verse 4 says **I will solve** or *expound* this universal quest to untie this riddle of life.<sup>2</sup>

WARNING: WEALTH CANNOT REDEEM FROM DEATH (vv. 5–12)

Listen up everyone to this WARNING: WEALTH CANNOT REDEEM FROM DEATH. Look at the lengthy question in verses 5–6. **Why should I fear in times**

**of trouble?** When is he afraid? **When the iniquity of those who cheat me surrounds me.** We talk about “climbing the ladder” don’t we? This means the Psalmist has experienced the fear of being on the lower rung of the socioeconomic ladder while others trample him on their way up. Who’s cheated him and caused him to fear? **Those who trust in their wealth and boast of the abundance of their riches?**

Why shouldn’t we be afraid? That’s his warning: **Truly no man can ransom another, or give to God the price of his life** (v. 7). He uses two words here. A **ransom** (*padhah*) is an economic term of the actual payment price to get out of debt while **the price of his life** (*kopher*) is the price to “cover” or cancel a debt. If you’re in debt \$1,000, I as your friend pay the ransom price to get you out of debt, which also forgives your debt. But the price of getting you out of debt to death is too high: **for the ransom of their life is costly and can never suffice, that he should live on forever and never see the pit** (vv. 8–9). In other words, you can cheat man with your wealth; you cannot cheat death!

The wise Psalmist passes down this nugget of truth that warns anyone who thinks he or she can pay this cost: **For he sees that even the wise die; the fool and the stupid alike must perish and leave their wealth to others** (v. 10). You can’t cheat death; it always gets its payment! All your wealth is

meaningless at death! Ironically the Psalmist says **their graves are their homes forever, their dwelling places to all generations, though they called lands by their own names** (v. 11). The uber-wealthy trust in their vast land holdings, but will decay in them! They name parts of the earth after themselves, but earth will always reclaim its rightful title in swallowing them up! Graves are the great leveler: they're all dug the same depth!

Note how he ends his warning with a *summary refrain*: **Man in his pomp will not remain; he is like the beasts that perish** (v. 12). Turn over to Ecclesiastes 3 and notice this with me:

I said in my heart with regard to the children of man that God is testing them that they may see that they themselves are but beasts. For what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts, for all is vanity. All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return. Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth? (vv. 18–21)

Listen up! You're going to die and wealth can't keep death at bay!

PROMISE: GOD CAN REDEEM FROM DEATH (vv. 13–20)

Listen up everyone to this PROMISE: GOD CAN REDEEM FROM DEATH. He continues reflection of the inevitability of death: **This is the path of those who have foolish confidence** (meaning, trusting in wealth); **yet after them people approve of their boasts** (v. 13). Then he adds: **Like sheep they are appointed**

**for Sheol; death shall be their shepherd** (v. 14). The Lord is our shepherd; he leads us *through* the valley of the shadow of death. Death is the wicked's shepherd; it leads *into* death! Embedded in this is a promise: **the upright shall rule over them in the morning** (v. 14). The “haves” oppress the “have nots” in this life, which is like a long day; but in the morning the tables are turned.

The main promise then comes: in contrast to verses 7–9 **God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me** (v. 15).

What we can't do with our wealth, God does. How? Turn over to 1 Peter 1:

...knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. (vv. 18–19)

This promise has an encouragement. Verse 5 is answered in verse 16: **be not afraid when a man becomes rich, when the glory of his house increases.**

Why not? **When he dies he will carry nothing away; his glory will not go down after him...For though, while he lives, he counts himself blessed...his soul will go to the generation of his fathers, who will never again see light** (vv. 17, 18, 19). Then comes his *summary refrain* again: **Man in his pomp (wealth) yet without understanding is like the beasts that perish** (v. 20).

Are you prepared to die? In Christ we are!

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Motyer, 127 n3.

<sup>2</sup> Futato, 176.